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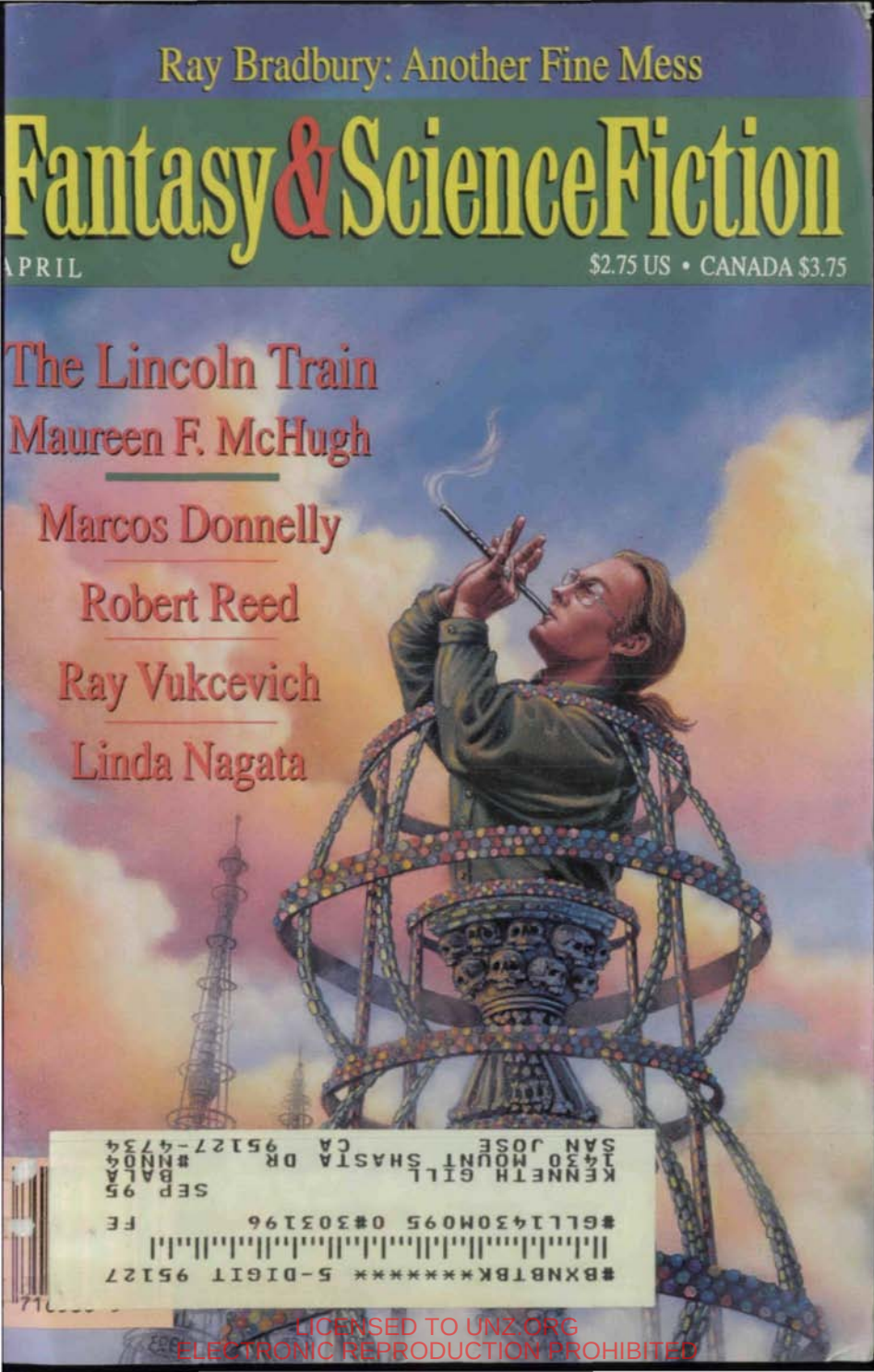

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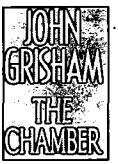

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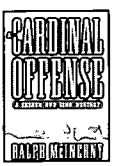

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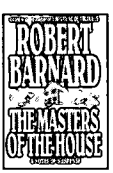

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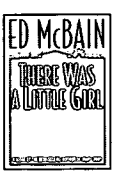

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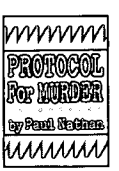

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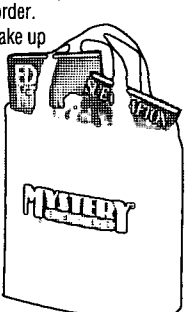

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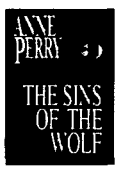

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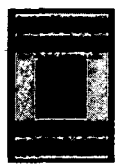

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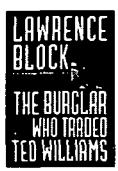

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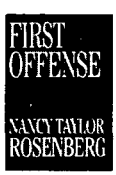

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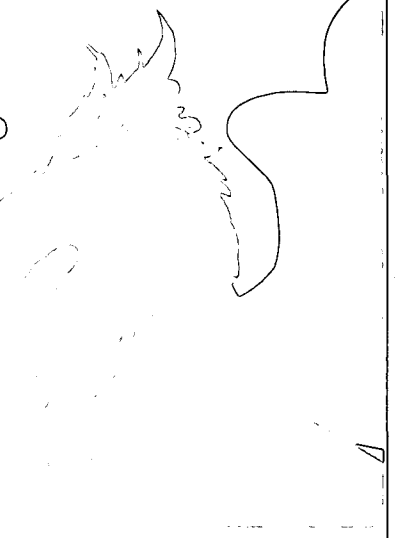

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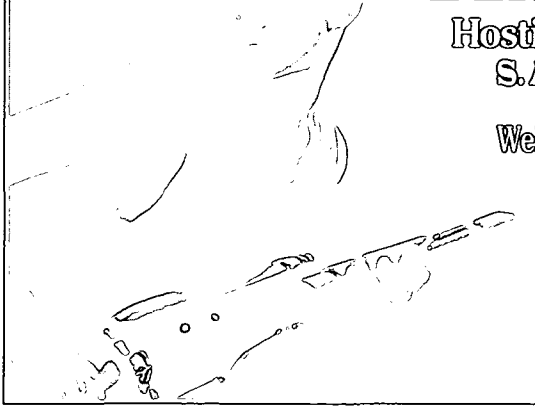

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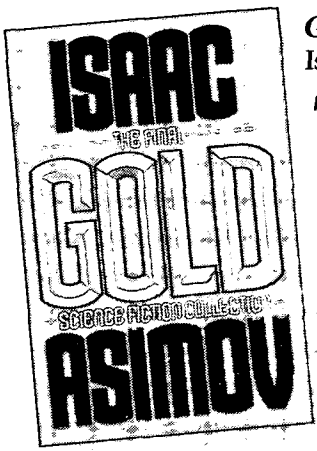

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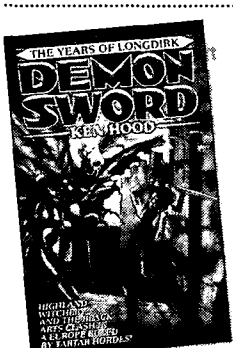
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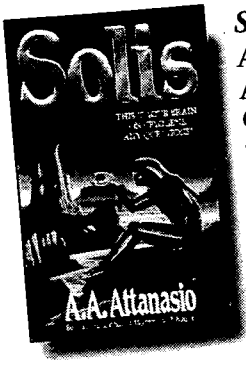

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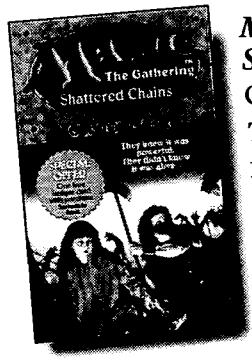

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

IN LAST YEAR'S May issue, I wrote an editorial about the reading list I keep. The list is an informal one, consisting of the books I have finished reading. (The books I read halfway don't count, nor do the magazines, short stories, or scripts.) The editorial proved to be popular. In it, I promised to discuss the list each year.

Well, as I write this in December, 1994's list looks like a bust. I stopped keeping track of the books I was reading in the summer when a few things converged. I was researching a novel, and a lot of the tomes I read had titles of fifteen words or more (with lots of colons, and at least two forms of the verb "to be"). I found the books fascinating, but not relaxing, and somehow not worth recording.

My relaxation reading turned to essays. Books like *The Art of the Personal Essay* by Phillip Lopate, and essay collections by writers like Joan Didion filled much of my time. But I never finished those books. Mostly I dabbled in them, finding gems here and there (including an essay by Michel de Montaigne called "Of Books" and another by Walter Benjamin called "Unpacking My Library").

If I wasn't reading essays, I was reading biographies from the serious (Schlesinger's biography of Robert F. Kennedy) to the sublime (Peter Guralnick's book on the rise of Elvis Presley — *Last Train to Memphis* — which I highly recommend). And if I wasn't reading biographies, I was rereading favorites such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Flowers for Algernon*.

What new full length fiction I read disappointed me, for the most part. My favorite authors in all the genres had new books out in 1994, but they seemed to have less spark. (Patricia Cornwell's *The Body Farm*, for example, is good, but in the past her work has been excellent.) For a while I thought the problem mine. Perhaps I was too critical. Perhaps I wasn't in the mood for long fiction (horrors!). Perhaps I needed to relax.

Then I opened an envelope containing an uncorrected page proof of a novel that will appear in 1995, and

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realized that I hadn't been too critical or in the wrong mood. I simply hadn't searched hard enough for the right book.

The novel that arrived should have gone to one of my reviewers, but I kept it instead and read it inside of two days. The opening paragraph hooked me:

> The Archangel was broadcasting from Chicago tonight. Danny Constantine had set up his view camera and strung an aerial wire from the windshield of his Ford to a section of rusted-out chain-link fence and he had been listening to her program, beamed from the deserted Blackstone Hotel in the heart of that dead, cold city, as she put it, for three hours, until his "B" batteries had gone dead. He cursed himself for not having charged the batteries before coming out tonight, because he loved the sound of the Archangel's voice, and loved the things she said. She was a wise guy, and a cynic, but she was sweet, too, and she told the truth about the way things really were: here in Milltown, Minnesota, and now down in Chi, too.

The author's voice grabbed me, speaking with the promise of a story well told. The novel satisfied that promise too, weaving a tale of murder in an alternate timeline, after a devastating plague (which started in World War I) has destroyed much of the civilized world. The story is both science fiction and fantasy, with a touch of mystery and horror thrown in. The author is Mike Conner, who has written a number of cover stories for *F&SF*. His story "Guide Dog" (May, 1991) won a Nebula and is already considered a classic in the field. The novel is called *Archangel*. By the time you read this, Tor books will have published the book in hardcover. Buy a copy. You'll be glad you did.

The other two books that caught my attention this year fit into some of the reading categories I listed above. The first of these is an old favorite, courtesy of Walker Books, who put out a 25th anniversary edition of *The Left Hand of Darkness* by Ursula K. Le Guin. This volume, which reproduces the original cover art by Alex Ebel, has a new afterword and appendices by the author. The novel is as wonderful as I remembered it being. It is nice to revisit old friends. Ambassador Genly Ai's struggle to understand a culture in which the people are male, female, and neither at the same time — a culture without fixed gender or gender bias — is as gripping on the second reading as it is on the first.

In her afterward, Le Guin discusses the difficulties of writing the

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novel, focusing on the choice of pronouns. English lacks a gender neutral pronoun, and Le Guin chose "he" as that pronoun when she wrote the book. She uses her appendices to explore the ways the book would read had she made up a new pronoun ("e") or used the feminine ("she"). This sounds like dry reading, but it is not. It is the very heart of science fiction, and the very heart of our identities. As always, Le Guin challenges our assumptions, our very beings, while she entertains. Even if you have a dog-eared copy of *Left Hand of Darkness*, pick up the anniversary edition. The non-fiction at the end is, in itself, worth the price of admission.

The third book that caught my attention is fiction, but it feels, at times, like essay. NESFA Press has compiled a book of Barry N. Malzberg's recursive science fiction — science fiction about science fiction. *The Passage of the Light*, edited by Mike Resnick and Anthony Lewis, contains a novel, two novellas, two novelettes, and eight short stories. The fiction spans Malzberg's career, and shows why he is one of the best writers working today. Some of the stories are controversial, even now, but all of them contain truth. All of them are entertaining as well.

I came to *The Passage of the Light* years after reading Malzberg's essays in *The Engines of the Night*.* That bittersweet book of essays (with one short story) is a must-read for anyone who wants a career in science fiction. It also won Malzberg the reproach of much of the field. *The Passage of the Light* has some of the same bite, but beneath the criticism, beneath the clear hard look, is an affection that goes deep. *The Passage of the Light* is one of the most fascinating books of 1994.

Somehow, even though I failed to keep up my list for 1994, I feel as if I had a great year of reading. The Mike Conner novel more than satisfied my taste for good full-length fiction. (And who can complain about a year which contains fiction by Malzberg, Le Guin, and Harper Lee?) My readings in 1994 were about as different from my readings in 1993 as possible. I can hardly wait to see what 1995 will bring.

---

* Which, careful readers will note, I once confused with Jack McDevitt's novel, *Engines of Creation*, in an introduction last year. I know that the books are quite different works, but my brain substituted "Night" for "Creation." Shows how much Barry's influence extends, even now. When someone says *Engines of...* I finish the thought with *the Night*.

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Maureen F. McHugh's most recent novel, Half the Day is Night, *appeared in 1994 from Tor Books. Her most recent appearance in* F&SF *("Virtual Love," January, 1994) is at the time of this writing on the preliminary Nebula Award ballot.*

Alternate history stories have become a popular form in the past few years due, in part, to the success of a series of "alternate" anthologies edited by Mike Resnick. "The Lincoln Train" was written for one of those anthologies (Alternate Tyrants, *Tor Books). Despite the fact that Maureen is working in an oversaturated field, she has come up with something new — and powerful. "The Lincoln Train" explores a very scary, and very plausible, what-might-have-been.*

The Lincoln Train

By Maureen F. McHugh

SOLDIERS OF THE G.A.R. STAND alongside the tracks. They are General Dodge's soldiers, keeping the tracks maintained for the Lincoln Train. If I stand right, the edges of my bonnet are like blinders and I can't see the soldiers at all. It is a spring evening. At the house the lilacs are blooming. My mother wears a sprig pinned to her dress under her cameo. I can smell it, even in the crush of these people all waiting for the train. I can smell the lilac, and the smell of too many people crowded together, and a faint taste of cinders on the air. I want to go home but that house is not ours anymore. I smooth my black dress. On the train platform we are all in mourning.

The train will take us to St. Louis, from whence we will leave for the Oklahoma territories. They say we will walk, but I don't know how my mother will do that. She has been poorly since the winter of '62. I check my bag with our water and provisions.

"Julia Adelaide," my mother says, "I think we should go home."

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"We've come to catch the train," I say, very sharp.

I'm Clara, my sister Julia is eleven years older than me. Julia is married and living in Tennessee. My mother blinks and touches her sprig of lilac uncertainly. If I am not sharp with her, she will keep on it.

I wait. When I was younger I used to try to school my unruly self in Christian charity. God sends us nothing we cannot bear. Now I only try to keep it from my face, try to keep my outer self disciplined. There is a feeling inside me, an anger, that I can't even speak. Something is being bent, like a bow, bending and bending and bending —

"When are we going home?" my mother says.

"Soon," I say because it is easy.

But she won't remember and in a moment she'll ask again. And again and again, through this long long train ride to St. Louis. I am trying to be a Christian daughter, and I remind myself that it is not her fault that the war turned her into an old woman, or that her mind is full of holes and everything new drains out. But it's not my fault either. I don't even try to curb my feelings and I know that they rise up to my face. The only way to be true is to be true from the inside and I am not. I am full of unchristian feelings. My mother's infirmity is her trial, and it is also mine.

I wish I were someone else.

The train comes down the track, chuffing, coming slow. It is an old, badly used thing, but I can see that once it was a model of chaste and beautiful workmanship. Under the dust it is a dark claret in color. It is said that the engine was built to be used by President Lincoln, but since the assassination attempt he is too infirm to travel. People begin to push to the edge of the platform, hauling their bags and worldly goods. I don't know how I will get our valise on. If Zeke could have come I could have at least insured that it was loaded on, but the Negroes are free now and they are not to help. The notice said no family Negroes could come to the station, although I see their faces here and there through the crowd.

The train stops outside the station to take on water.

"Is it your father?" my mother says diffidently. "Do you see him on the train?"

"No, Mother," I say. "We are taking the train."

"Are we going to see your father?" she asks.

It doesn't matter what I say to her, she'll forget it in a few minutes, but

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I cannot say yes to her. I cannot say that we will see my father even to give her a few moments of joy.

"Are we going to see your father?" she asks again.

"No," I say.

"Where are we going?"

I have carefully explained it all to her and she cried, every time I did. People are pushing down the platform toward the train, and I am trying to decide if I should move my valise toward the front of the platform. Why are they in such a hurry to get on the train? It is taking us all away.

"Where are we going? Julia Adelaide, you will answer me this moment," my mother says, her voice too full of quaver to quite sound like her own.

"I'm Clara," I say. "We're going to St. Louis."

"St. Louis," she says. "We don't need to go to St. Louis. We can't get through the lines, Julia, and I...I am quite indisposed. Let's go back home now, this is foolish."

We cannot go back home. General Dodge has made it clear that if we did not show up at the train platform this morning and get our names checked off the list, he would arrest every man in town, and then he would shoot every tenth man. The town knows to believe him, General Dodge was put in charge of the trains into Washington, and he did the same thing then. He arrested men and held them and every time the train was fired upon he hanged a man.

There is a shout and I can only see the crowd moving like a wave, pouring off the edge of the platform. Everyone is afraid there will not be room. I grab the valise and I grab my mother's arm and pull them both. The valise is so heavy that my fingers hurt, and the weight of our water and food is heavy on my arm. My mother is small and when I put her in bed at night she is all tiny like a child, but now she refuses to move, pulling against me and opening her mouth wide, her mouth pink inside and wet and open in a wail I can just barely hear over the shouting crowd. I don't know if I should let go of the valise to pull her, or for a moment I think of letting go of her, letting someone else get her on the train and finding her later.

A man in the crowd shoves her hard from behind. His face is twisted in wrath. What is he so angry at? My mother falls into me, and the crowd pushes us. I am trying to hold on to the valise, but my gloves are slippery, and I can only hold with my right hand, with my left I am trying to hold up my mother. The crowd is pushing all around us, trying to push us toward the edge of the platform.

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The train toots as if it were moving. There is shouting all around us. My mother is fallen against me, her face pressed against my bosom, turned up toward me. She is so frightened. Her face is pressed against me in improper intimacy, as if she were my child. My mother as my child. I am filled with revulsion and horror. The pressure against us begins to lessen. I still have a hold of the valise. We'll be all right. Let the others push around, I'll wait and get the valise on somehow. They won't leave us travel without anything.

My mother's eyes close. Her wrinkled face looks up, the skin under her eyes making little pouches, as if it were a second blind eyelid. Everything is so grotesque. I am having a spell. I wish I could be somewhere where I could get away and close the windows. I have had these spells since they told us that my father was dead, where everything is full of horror and strangeness.

The person behind me is crowding into my back and I want to tell them to give way, but I cannot. People around us are crying out. I cannot see anything but the people pushed against me. People are still pushing, but now they are not pushing toward the side of the platform but toward the front, where the train will be when we are allowed to board.

Wait, I call out but there's no way for me to tell if I've really called out or not. I can't hear anything until the train whistles. The train has moved? They brought the train into the station? I can't tell, not without letting go of my mother and the valise. My mother is being pulled down into this mass. I feel her sliding against me. Her eyes are closed. She is a huge doll, limp in my arms. She is not even trying to hold herself up. She has given up to this moment.

I can't hold on to my mother and the valise. So I let go of the valise.

Oh merciful god.

I do not know how I will get through this moment.

The crowd around me is a thing that presses me and pushes me up, pulls me down. I cannot breathe for the pressure. I see specks in front of my eyes, white sparks, too bright, like metal and like light. My feet aren't under me. I am buoyed by the crowd and my feet are behind me. I am unable to stand, unable to fall. I think my mother is against me, but I can't tell, and in this mass I don't know how she can breathe.

I think I am going to die.

All the noise around me does not seem like noise anymore. It is something else, some element, like water or something, surrounding me and overpowering me.

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It is like that for a long time, until finally I have my feet under me, and I'm leaning against people. I feel myself sink, but I can't stop myself. The platform is solid. My whole body feels bruised and roughly used.

My mother is not with me. My mother is a bundle of black on the ground, and I crawl to her. I wish I could say that as I crawl to her I feel concern for her condition, but at this moment I am no more than base animal nature and I crawl to her because she is mine and there is nothing else in the world I can identify as mine. Her skirt is rucked up so that her ankles and calves are showing. Her face is black. At first I think it something about her clothes, but it is her face, so full of blood that it is black.

People are still getting on the train, but there are people on the platform around us, left behind. And other things. A surprising number of shoes, all badly used. Wraps, too. Bags. Bundles and people.

I try raising her arms above her head, to force breath into her lungs. Her arms are thin, but they don't go the way I want them to. I read in the newspaper that when President Lincoln was shot, he stopped breathing, and his personal physician started him breathing again. But maybe the newspaper was wrong, or maybe it is more complicated than I understand, or maybe it doesn't always work. She doesn't breathe.

I sit on the platform and try to think of what to do next. My head is empty of useful thoughts. Empty of prayers.

"Ma'am?"

It's a soldier of the G.A.R.

"Yes sir?" I say. It is difficult to look up at him, to look up into the sun.

He hunkers down but does not touch her. At least he doesn't touch her. "Do you have anyone staying behind?"

Like cousins or something? Someone who is not "recalcitrant" in their handling of their Negroes? "Not in town," I say.

"Did she worship?" he asks, in his northern way.

"Yes sir," I say, "she did. She was a Methodist, and you should contact the preacher. The Reverend Robert Ewald, sir."

"I'll see to it, ma'am. Now you'll have to get on the train."

"And leave her?" I say.

"Yes ma'am, the train will be leaving. I'm sorry ma'am."

"But I can't," I say.

He takes my elbow and helps me stand. And I let him.

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"We are not really recalcitrant," I say. "Where were Zeke and Rachel supposed to go? Were we supposed to throw them out?"

He helps me climb onto the train. People stare at me as I get on, and I realize I must be all in disarray. I stand under all their gazes, trying to get my bonnet on straight and smoothing my dress. I do not know what to do with my eyes or hands.

There are no seats. Will I have to stand until St. Louis? I grab a seat back to hold myself up. It is suddenly warm and everything is distant and I think I am about to faint. My stomach turns. I breathe through my mouth, not even sure that I am holding on to the seat back.

But I don't fall, thank Jesus.

"It's not Lincoln," someone is saying, a man's voice, rich and baritone, and I fasten on the words as a lifeline, drawing myself back to the train car, to the world. "It's Seward. Lincoln no longer has the capacity to govern."

The train smells of bodies and warm sweaty wool. It is a smell that threatens to undo me, so I must concentrate on breathing through my mouth. I breathe in little pants, like a dog. The heat lies against my skin. It is airless.

"Of course Lincoln can no longer govern, but that damned actor made him a saint when he shot him," says a second voice, "And now no one dare oppose him. It doesn't matter if his policies make sense or not."

"You're wrong," says the first. "Seward is governing through him. Lincoln is an imbecile. He can't govern, look at the way he handled the war."

The second snorts. "He won."

"No," says the first, "we *lost*, there is a difference, sir. We lost even though the north never could find a competent general." I know the type of the first one. He's the one who thinks he is brilliant, who always knew what President Davis should have done. If they are looking for a recalcitrant southerner, they have found one.

"Grant was competent. Just not brilliant. Any military man who is not Alexander the Great is going to look inadequate in comparison with General Lee."

"Grant was a drinker," the first one says. "It was his subordinates. They'd been through years of war. They knew what to do."

It is so hot on the train. I wonder how long until the train leaves.

I wonder if the Reverend will write my sister in Tennessee and tell her about our mother. I wish the train were going east toward Tennessee instead of north and west toward St. Louis.

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My valise. All I have. It is on the platform. I turn and go to the door. It is closed and I try the handle, but it is too stiff for me. I look around for help.

"It's locked," says a woman in gray. She doesn't look unkind.

"My things, I left them on the platform," I say.

"Oh, honey," she says, "they aren't going to let you back out there. They don't let anyone off the train."

I look out the window but I can't see the valise. I can see some of the soldiers, so I beat on the window. One of them glances up at me, frowning, but then he ignores me.

The train blows that it is going to leave, and I beat harder on the glass. If I could shatter that glass. They don't understand, they would help me if they understood. The train lurches and I stagger. It is out there, somewhere, on that platform. Clothes for my mother and me, blankets, things we will need. Things I will need.

The train pulls out of the station and I feel so terrible I sit down on the floor in all the dirt from people's feet and sob.

The train creeps slowly at first, but then picks up speed. The clack-clack clack-clack rocks me. It is improper, but I allow it to rock me. I am in others' hands now and there is nothing to do but be patient. I am good at that. So it has been all my life. I have tried to be dutiful, but something in me has not bent right, and I have never been able to maintain a Christian frame of mind, but like a chicken in a yard, I have always kept my eyes on the small things. I have tended to what was in front of me, first the house, then my mother. When we could not get sugar, I learned to cook with molasses and honey. Now I sit and let my mind go empty and let the train rock me.

"Child," someone says. "Child."

The woman in gray has been trying to get my attention for awhile, but I have been sitting and letting myself be rocked.

"Child," she says again, "would you like some water?"

Yes, I realize, I would. She has a jar and she gives it to me to sip out of. "Thank you," I say. "We brought water, but we lost it in the crush on the platform."

"You have someone with you?" she asks.

"My mother," I say, and start crying again. "She is old, and there was such a press on the platform, and she fell and was trampled."

"What's your name," the woman says.

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"Clara Corbett," I say.

"I'm Elizabeth Loudon," the woman says. "And you are welcome to travel with me." There is something about her, a simple pleasantness, that makes me trust her. She is a small women, with a small nose and eyes as gray as her dress. She is younger than I first thought, maybe only in her thirties? "How old are you? Do you have family?" she asks.

"I am seventeen. I have a sister, Julia. But she doesn't live in Mississippi anymore."

"Where does she live?" the woman asks.

"In Beech Bluff, near Jackson, Tennessee."

She shakes her head. "I don't know it. Is it good country?"

"I think so," I say. "In her letters it sounds like good country. But I haven't seen her for seven years." Of course no one could travel during the war. She has three children in Tennessee. My sister is twenty-eight, almost as old as this woman. It is hard to imagine.

"Were you close?" she asks.

I don't know that we were close. But she is my sister. She is all I have, now. I hope that the Reverend will write her about my mother, but I don't know that he knows where she is. I will have to write her. She will think I should have taken better care.

"Are you traveling alone?"

"My companion is a few seats farther in front. He and I could not find seats together."

Her companion is a man? Not her husband, maybe her brother? But she would say her brother if that's who she meant. A woman traveling with a man. An adventuress, I think. There are stories of women traveling, hoping to find unattached girls like myself. They befriend the young girls and then deliver them to the brothels of New Orleans.

For a moment Elizabeth takes on a sinister cast. But this is a train full of recalcitrant southerners, there is no opportunity to kidnap anyone. Elizabeth is like me, a woman who has lost her home.

It takes the rest of the day and a night to get to St. Louis, and Elizabeth and I talk. It's as if we talk in ciphers, instead of talking about home we talk about gardening, and I can see the garden at home, lazy with bees. She is a quilter. I don't quilt, but I used to do petit pointe, so we can talk sewing and about how hard it has been to get colors. And we talk about mending and

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making do, we have all been making do for so long.

When it gets dark, since I have no seat, I stay where I am sitting by the door of the train. I am so tired, but in the darkness all I can think of is my mother's face in the crowd and her hopeless open mouth. I don't want to think of my mother, but I am in a delirium of fatigue, surrounded by the dark and the rumble of the train and the distant murmur of voices. I sleep sitting by the door of the train, fitful and rocked. I have dreams like fever dreams. In my dream I am in a strange house, but it is supposed to be my own house, but nothing is where it should be, and I begin to believe that I have actually entered a stranger's house, and that they'll return and find me here. When I wake up and go back to sleep, I am back in this strange house, looking through things.

I wake before dawn, only a little rested. My shoulders and hips and back all ache from the way I am leaning, but I have no energy to get up. I have no energy to do anything but endure. Elizabeth nods, sometimes awake, sometimes asleep, but neither of us speak.

Finally the train slows. We come in through a town, but the town seems to go on and on. It must be St. Louis. We stop and sit. The sun comes up and heats the car like an oven. There is no movement of the air. There are so many buildings in St. Louis, and so many of them are tall, two stories, that I wonder if they cut off the wind and that is why it's so still. But finally the train lurches and we crawl into the station.

I am one of the first off the train by virtue of my position near the door. A soldier unlocks it and shouts for all of us to disembark, but he need not have bothered for there is a rush. I am borne ahead at its beginning but I can stop at the back of the platform. I am afraid that I have lost Elizabeth, but I see her in the crowd. She is on the arm of a younger man in a bowler. There is something about his air that marks him as different — he is sprightly and apparently fresh even after the long ride.

I almost let them pass, but the prospect of being alone makes me reach out and touch her shoulder.

"There you are," she says.

We join a queue of people waiting to use a trench. The smell is appalling, ammonia acrid and eye-watering. There is a wall to separate the men from the women, but the women are all together. I crouch, trying not to notice anyone and trying to keep my skirts out of the filth. It is so awful. It's worse than anything. I feel so awful.

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What if my mother were here? What would I do? I think maybe it was better, maybe it was God's hand. But that is an awful thought, too.

"Child," Elizabeth says when I come out, "what's the matter?"

"It's so awful," I say. I shouldn't cry, but I just want to be home and clean. I want to go to bed and sleep.

She offers me a biscuit.

"You should save your food," I say.

"Don't worry," Elizabeth says, "We have enough."

I shouldn't accept it, but I am so hungry. And when I have a little to eat, I feel a little better.

I try to imagine what the fort will be like where we will be going. Will we have a place to sleep, or will it be barracks? Or worse yet, tents? Although after the night I spent on the train I can't imagine anything that could be worse. I imagine if I have to stay awhile in a tent then I'll make the best of it.

"I think this being in limbo is perhaps worse than anything we can expect at the end," I say to Elizabeth. She smiles.

She introduces her companion, Michael. He is enough like her to be her brother, but I don't think that they are. I am resolved not to ask, if they want to tell me they can.

We are standing together, not saying anything, when there is some commotion farther up the platform. It is a woman, her black dress is like smoke. She is running down the platform, coming toward us. There are all of these people and yet it is as if there is no obstacle for her. "NO NO NO NO, DON'T TOUCH ME! FILTHY HANDS! DON'T LET THEM TOUCH YOU! DON'T GET ON THE TRAINS!"

People are getting out of her way. Where are the soldiers? The fabric of her dress is so threadbare it is rotten and torn at the seams. Her skirt is greasy black and matted and stained. Her face is so thin. "ANIMALS! THERE IS NOTHING OUT THERE! PEOPLE DON'T HAVE FOOD! THERE IS NOTHING THERE BUT INDIANS! THEY SENT US OUT TO SETTLE BUT THERE WAS NOTHING THERE!"

I expect she will run past me but she grabs my arm and stops and looks into my face. She has light eyes, pale eyes in her dark face. She is mad.

"WE WERE ALL STARVING, SO WE WENT TO THE FORT BUT THE FORT HAD NOTHING. YOU WILL ALL STARVE, THE WAY THEY ARE STARVING THE INDIANS! THEY WILL LET US ALL DIE! THEY DON'T CARE!" She is screaming in my face, and her spittle sprays me, warm as her

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breath. Her hand is all tendons and twigs, but she's so strong I can't escape.

The soldiers grab her and yank her away from me. My arm aches where she was holding it. I can't stand up.

Elizabeth pulls me upright. "Stay close to me," she says and starts to walk the other way down the platform. People are looking up following the screaming woman.

She pulls me along with her. I keep thinking of the woman's hand and wrist turned black with grime. I remember my mother's face was black when she lay on the platform. Black like something rotted.

"Here," Elizabeth says at an old door, painted green but now weathered. The door opens and we pass inside.

"What?" I say. My eyes are accustomed to the morning brightness and I can't see.

"Her name is Clara," Elizabeth says. "She has people in Tennessee."

"Come with me," says another woman. She sounds older. "Step this way. Where are her things?"

I am being kidnapped. Oh merciful God, I'll die. I let out a moan.

"Her things were lost, her mother was killed in a crush on the platform."

The woman in the dark clucks sympathetically. "Poor dear. Does Michael have his passenger yet?"

"In a moment," Elizabeth says. "We were lucky for the commotion."

I am beginning to be able to see. It is a storage room, full of abandoned things. The woman holding my arm is older. There are some broken chairs and a stool. She sits me in the chair. Is Elizabeth some kind of adventuress?

"Who are you?" I ask.

"We are friends," Elizabeth says. "We will help you get to your sister."

I don't believe them. I will end up in New Orleans. Elizabeth is some kind of adventuress.

After a moment the door opens and this time it is Michael with a young man. "This is Andrew," he says.

A man? What do they want with a man? That is what stops me from saying, "Run!" Andrew is blinded by the change in light, and I can see the astonishment working on his face, the way it must be working on mine. "What is this?" he asks.

"You are with Friends," Michael says, and maybe he has said it differently than Elizabeth, or maybe it is just that this time I have had the wit to hear it.

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"Quakers?" Andrew says. "Abolitionists?"

Michael smiles, I can see his teeth white in the darkness. "Just Friends," he says.

Abolitionists. Crazy people who steal slaves to set them free. Have they come to kidnap us? We are recalcitrant southerners, I have never heard of Quakers seeking revenge, but everyone knows the Abolitionists are crazy and they are liable to do anything.

"We'll have to wait here until they begin to move people out, it will be evening before we can leave," says the older woman.

I am so frightened, I just want to be home. Maybe I should try to break free and run out to the platform, there are northern soldiers out there. Would they protect me? And then what, go to a fort in Oklahoma?

The older woman asks Michael how they could get past the guards so early and he tells her about the madwoman. A "refugee" he calls her.

"They'll just take her back," Elizabeth says, sighing.

Take her back, do they mean that she really came from Oklahoma? They talk about how bad it will be this winter. Michael says there are Wisconsin Indians re-settled down there, but they've got no food, and they've been starving on government handouts for a couple of years. Now there will be more people. They're not prepared for winter.

There can't have been much handout during the war. It was hard enough to feed the armies.

They explain to Andrew and to me that we will sneak out of the train station this evening, after dark. We will spend a day with a Quaker family in St. Louis, and then they will send us on to the next family. And so we will be passed hand to hand, like a bucket in a brigade, until we get to our families.

They call it the underground railroad.

But we are slave owners.

"Wrong is wrong," says Elizabeth. "Some of us can't stand and watch people starve."

"But only two out of the whole train," Andrew says.

Michael sighs.

The old woman nods. "It isn't right."

Elizabeth picked me because my mother died. If my mother had not died, I would be out there, on my way to starve with the rest of them.

I can't help it but I start to cry. I should not profit from my mother's death. I should have kept her safe.

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"Hush, now," says Elizabeth. "Hush, you'll be okay."

"It's not right," I whisper. I'm trying not to be loud, we mustn't be discovered.

"What, child?"

"You shouldn't have picked me," I say. But I am crying so hard I don't think they can understand me. Elizabeth strokes my hair and wipes my face. It may be the last time someone will do these things for me. My sister has three children of her own, and she won't need another child. I'll have to work hard to make up my keep.

There are blankets there and we lie down on the hard floor, all except Michael, who sits in a chair and sleeps. I sleep this time with fewer dreams. But when I wake up, although I can't remember what they were, I have the feeling that I have been dreaming restless dreams.

The stars are bright when we finally creep out of the station. A night full of stars. The stars will be the same in Tennessee. The platform is empty, the train and the people are gone. The Lincoln Train has gone back south while we slept, to take more people out of Mississippi.

"Will you come back and save more people?" I ask Elizabeth.

The stars are a banner behind her quiet head. "We will save what we can," she says.

It isn't fair that I was picked. "I want to help," I tell her.

She is silent for a moment. "We only work with our own," she says. There is something in her voice that has not been there before. A sharpness.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"There are no slavers in our ranks," she says and her voice is cold.

I feel as if I have had a fever; tired, but clear of mind. I have never walked so far and not walked beyond a town. The streets of St. Louis are empty. There are few lights. Far off a woman is singing, and her voice is clear and carries easily in the night. A beautiful voice.

"Elizabeth," Michael says, "she is just a girl."

"She needs to know," Elizabeth says.

"Why did you save me then?" I ask.

"One does not fight evil with evil," Elizabeth says.

"I'm not evil!" I say.

But no one answers.

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BOOKS

ROBERT K.J. KILLHEFFER

CHASING SHADOWS

Northern Stars: The Anthology of Canadian Science Fiction, edited by David G. Hartwell and Glenn Grant, Tor Books, 384 pp, $21.95

Alien Shores: An Anthology of Australian Science Fiction, edited by Peter McNamara and Margaret Winch, Aphelion Publications, 603 pp, $15.00 (Aphelion Publications, P.O. Box 619, North Adelaide, South Australia 5006)

ONE CAN debate about the original roots of science fiction—was it Mary Shelley with *Frankenstein* in 1818, Hugo Gernsback with *Amazing Stories* in 1926, Cyrano de Bergerac's *Other Worlds* (1657), or even Lucian of Samosata's *The True History* (2nd century A.D.)? Wherever you mark its start, there's no doubt that the explosive growth of the sf *genre* in the 20th century has been dominated by the American and British brands. Practically every major name you could mention in the history of 20th century sf has come from the U.S. or the U.K.: Asimov, Heinlein, Herbert, Clarke, Le Guin, Ballard, Aldiss, Delany, Sturgeon, Stapledon, Tiptree, and so on. With the exception of Jules Verne, whose influence cannot be neglected, American and British writers have commanded the stage.

But there have always been active, even thriving, sf communities in other countries, and over the years some of the sf written in other languages has made it into our magazines and onto our bookstore shelves. Macmillan published a series of Soviet science fiction volumes during the late 1970s and early 1980s, including anthologies of short fiction and novels by Boris and Arkady Strugatsky (the best known Russian sf writers to American readers). There have been anthologies of Japanese science fiction, Chinese science fiction, Dutch science fiction, and translations of stories by writers such as Wolfgang Jeschke, Kono Tensei, and Gérard Klein have appeared in prominent venues such as Bantam's *Full Spectrum* anthology series, David G.

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Hartwell's *The World Treasury of Science Fiction*, and even this admirable magazine whose most recent issue you're holding.

While the sf of other nations has been receiving some attention, "foreign" sf a lot closer to home has sometimes been lost in the shuffle. Other predominantly English-speaking countries such as Canada and Australia have very healthy sf communities as well. They haven't exactly been ignored — the most recent World Science Fiction Convention was held in Winnipeg, after all, and far more Canadian and Australian authors find publishers here than do Italian, Czechoslovakian, or Taiwanese writers. But they rarely receive the same sort of specialized attention, probably because writers like Greg Egan, William Gibson, George Turner, and Élizabeth Vonarburg are so familiar to U.S. readers that it's easy to forget that they are just the best known and most successful representatives of the larger native communities of sf readers, writers, and fans in their home countries. (It's also because most of them — except Vonarburg — write in English, blending right in with the British and American writers.) Canadian and Australian writers are more often discussed in the context of the larger trends in American and British sf than in terms of their native contexts.

(We could, now, digress into a discussion of whether it's better to divide writers by region, nation, sex, etc., or to consider the whole field as a continuous entity without reference to such categories, but there's no need for that; it's not that discussing Egan and Turner in terms of other Australian sf is better or worse, it's just one way to go — a path not often taken. Well, we're going to take it.)

Northern Stars is an ambitious assembly of stories by contemporary Canadian sf writers — twenty-five stories (and two novel excerpts) reprinted from a variety of sources, including several from the Canadian anthology series *Tesseracts* and the French-Canadian magazine *Solaris*. What the book makes immediately clear (for anyone who doubted it) is that sf in Canada is a serious and vital phenomenon. One of the first things an America reader might notice is how many of the names are already familiar: William Gibson, Andrew Weiner, Élizabeth Vonarburg, Dave Duncan, Spider Robinson, Robert J. Sawyer, and many others. Right away, from the table of contents alone, Canadian sf is clearly a force to be reckoned with.

And it helps that these familiar names are represented here by some of their best work. William Gibson's underappreciated "The Winter Market" — not one of his famous Sprawl

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stories — displays all the qualities that have made him the most successful science fiction writer to appear in the 1980s: his keen-edged prose style, his knack for visual imagery, his ear for dialogue, his eye for the social patterns and cultural developments of the late 20th century. He makes a tale of the entertainment biz and cybernetic self-downloaded immortality (which might by now have seemed a little quaint) moving and compelling.

Élizabeth Vonarburg's "Home by the Sea" is a powerful story of self-discovery in a world of genetic mutation and artificially manufactured people. In "Distant Signals," Andrew Weiner offers a wry and very intelligent take on the idea of aliens receiving our old TV broadcasts. Dave Duncan's "Under Another Moon" has a very different feel from his popular fantasy novels — it might be an episode out of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, but for the odd gender-shifting which becomes increasingly apparent as the tale unfolds. Spider Robinson's "User Friendly" is an uncharacteristically serious story exploring the feelings many Canadians have for their brash insensitive neighbors to the south.

But the next thing one notices about *Northern Stars* is how many good stories there are by writers less well-known in the U.S. The first one, "A Niche" by Peter Watts, is a taut story of psychological manipulation, and it's all the more impressive to note that this is Watts's first (and so far only) published story. Candas Jane Dorsey — who deserves to be much more widely read than she has been so far — contributes "(Learning About) Machine Sex," a tale of computer hacking, artificial intelligence, and yes, sexuality. She should be ranked alongside Pat Cadigan for bringing a much-needed female perspective to the male-dominated cyberpunk club. Heather Spears offers "One," a story of alienation and final acceptance in a world where everyone is born with two heads. And "Stolen Fires" by Yves Menard has something of the feel of a Gene Wolfe story, with its aura of mythological significance and the way it reveals itself obliquely through two differing but complementary viewpoints.

With such a weight of quality material, *Northern Stars* undoubtedly accomplishes its central mission: as coeditor Grant puts it in his introduction, "to show the world what's going on in Canada today, to let everybody know that a vibrant SF scene has been bubbling along here for quite some time, and which, in the last ten years, has really started to put on steam." But Hartwell and Grant are also clearly trying to make the case for a distinctively *Canadian* brand of sf, to identify unifying

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factors which set it apart from the sf of other nations (particularly the U.S. and the U.K.). Grant declares, "I believe that our SF writing does share certain common characteristics that distinguish it from American and British SF," and he and Hartwell have included two essays on Canadian sf among the stories here (by Judith Merril and Candas Jane Dorsey), as well as an appendix detailing the Canadian sf awards and their winners over the years, and extensive introductions to each story. *Northern Stars* is not merely an anthology; it's a manifesto.

So is there a distinctively Canadian sf? Judging from the stories in this book, the answer's not immediately obvious. The introduction to Robert Charles Wilson's story, "Ballads in 3/4 Time," quotes from the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* on the "great Canadian theme" of "geographical alienation," but there doesn't seem to me to be all that much in *Northern Stars* to illustrate it. Spider Robinson's story addresses Canadian resentment toward the U.S. rather directly, and several stories (such as Élizabeth Vonarburg's, Donald Kingsbury's, and Heather Spears's) deal with the general theme of alienation, though in a more personal than geographical sense. But I don't think there are significantly more stories about alienation of either sort here than there might be in the average anthology of contemporary American or British sf.

A recent nonfiction book about Canada — Lansing Lamont's *Breakup: The Coming End of Canada and the Stakes for America* notes that "the consciousness of northernness and space" lies at the center of the Canadian spirit, and this feeling does come through in several of these stories. Garfield Reeves-Stevens's "Outport" expresses the disdain of hardy northern frontiersmen for the soft urban people of the south, and Gibson's "The Winter Market" sets the scene in its opening line: "It rains a lot, up here; there are winter days when it doesn't really get light at all, only a bright, indeterminate grey." Glenn Grant's "Memetic Drift," Claude-Michel Prévost's "Happy Days in Old Chernobyl," Jean-Louis Trudel's "Remember, the Dead Say," Daniel Sernine's "Stardust Boulevard," and other pieces here feature a similar atmosphere of gray wilderness, even though some are set in bleak urban environments; there's a heavy presence as of lowering snowclouds running through many of these selections. But, still, it's not an element that reaches across all or even most of these stories, so it's hard to assert that a sense of "northernness and space" defines a uniquely Canadian sf.

The introduction to Yves Menard's story observes "a tendency in Québécois SF towards lyricism and extended metaphor, verging on allegory," and this I think strikes a

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little closer to the heart of the matter. In his general introduction, Glenn Grant quotes from Douglas Barbour, who notes that Canadian sf often "resists the siren call of plot for something more subtle and finally more rewarding." Many of the stories in *Northern Stars* have a tendency toward laconic, almost meditative, observation and description, and in place of classic plot structures of conflict and resolution they often present scenarios which change little or not at all over the course of the story. Daniel Sernine's "Stardust Boulevard" follows its enervated protagonist in two separate narratives (one present, one past) through his life of perpetual Carnival in a city of the leisure-filled post-apocalyptic future; the story runs very much like this: "*Image after image. I don't see them come, I don't see them go. I live only in a very finished present that excludes all continuity. To keep it that way, I light up another joint.*" Sernine gives us scenes, images, descriptions of sensations and actions, and once or twice the hint of a metaphorical significance, but there is surely no plot as we more familiar with American sf know it. In Claude-Michel Prévost's "Happy Days in Old Chernobyl" things happen, people die, there are battles and sorrows, but it's all related in a kind of eternal present like Sernine's, producing the sense here as well that we're getting a glimpse of a future world, but not a *story* in the usual sense.

As the editors note, this tendency toward relatively plotless mood-pieces runs strongest among the Québécois writers, but it's not limited to them. In John Park's "Retrieval," a man discovers some of the truth about his past, but it leads to no real change in his circumstances; the story opens with him looking out on a game of cricket from his home in a ruined museum, and ends there as well: "He turned and began to walk back to the museum on Stockhausen Square." Spider Robinson's story expresses strong feelings, but offers no resolution to its central problem — the random possession of people on Earth by aliens who use their bodies for a time and then discard them. And in Terence M. Green's "The Woman Who Is the Midnight Wind," there is a narrative movement, but few if any of the questions raised in the text are answered by the end; it leaves all the resolution out. Nevertheless, there are still too many stories here which contradict this tendency, stories with strong traditional plotlines and structures, to let us settle on this characteristic as the distinctive badge of Canadian sf. Robert J. Sawyer's "Just Like Old Times," Robert Charles Wilson's "Ballads in 3/4 Time," Peter Watts's "A Niche," Heather Spears's "One," Charles de Lint's "Pity the Monsters,"

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James Alan Gardner's "The Reckoning of Gifts" — there are as many stories here with conventional plotting as there are lyrical mood-pieces.

(An interesting question, which I cannot answer, is how different the Québécois style is from other French-language sf. I don't read French, and haven't seen enough French sf in translation to make any judgment, but it seems to me that if the French-Canadian sf tendency away from plot is shared by French sf, that's even more reason to reject that tendency as a hallmark of Canadian sf.)

Another observation in Grant's introduction, though, seems to me the most universal of all the generalizations offered for a Canadian brand of sf. He notes that in Canada, "even more than in Britain," there's less of a barrier between "SF and 'real literature,' and thus many Canadian writers, even some of our Big Names, are quite comfortable to drift between the mainstream and the various genres. We are happy to be surfers of the Slipstream." This, I think, may be the closest we can come to naming a trait common to most of the stories in this volume. The majority of stories in *Northern Stars* show the unmistakable influence of contemporary mainstream literary habits — even the plotlessness discussed above might be explained this way. Eleven of these stories are told in the present tense, a common literary affectation, and many of those that aren't have unusual quirks or approaches. Jean-Louis Trudel's "Remember, the Dead Say" is framed with a pair of present-tense mood-setting passages; Michael G. Coney's "The Byrds" is an odd bit of the surreal, and it's followed immediately by Joël Champetier's "Soluble-Fish," even more bizarre and unconventional. Very few of these stories have the stripped-down prose so often praised by American sf readers. Heather Spears opens "One" thus: "Tasman's earliest memories were not good ones. A brightness not escapable — she is lying in a transparent box and being watched." Not the sort of beginning you'd get from an Asimov or Clarke; much more like Le Guin and other champions of literary qualities in sf.

Not surprisingly, Spears has published just as actively in the literary mainstream (with nine books of poetry) as in the genre, and several other contributors to *Northern Stars* have a foot in the wider world of literature as well. Terence M. Green's two novels, though recognizably sf, were published outside the genre as contemporary fiction, and he's received several grants for fiction writing from the Ontario Arts Council Writer's Reserve and the Canada Council Project; Daniel Sernine has also written children's books, edits a magazine about children's literature, and has received awards for his work in

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that area. But even those authors associated entirely with sf thus far in their careers tend not to follow the standard straight-ahead narrative formulas of the field. Candas Jane Dorsey's story, for instance, begins with a direct address to the reader: "A naked woman working at a computer. Which attracts you most?"

If *Northern Stars* makes a case for a specifically Canadian brand of sf, it's in the confluence of traditional sf motifs and scenarios and mainstream literary forms and values. And, though the book gathers stories of very high quality, it also hints at why the distinctively Canadian variety of sf hasn't made more inroads into the American marketplace. It's no accident that the stories by the most recognizable names here are also, by and large, those most similar to the styles and concerns common in American sf. One might almost plot it on a graph: the less familiar a name might be on the table of contents, the more likely (in general) that their story breaks with the traditions of American sf. Lyrical, meditative, experimental mood pieces might be "more rewarding" to some readers, as Douglas Barbour has it, but they're certainly not seen as very marketable in this country.

Does that mean they're no good? Of course not. That's part of the point of *Northern Stars*, and it's the best reason to pick the book up. Cross the border — though it's only the next country over, Canadian sf offers some unique pleasures you won't find at home.

Alien Shores, like *Northern Stars*, offers a wide-ranging look at the contemporary sf in another English-speaking country— in this case, Australia. Editors Peter McNamara and Margaret Winch have gathered twenty-nine stories (twenty-two originals, seven reprints) from their nation's leading sf writers, and though they haven't set out as explicitly as Hartwell and Grant to define a distinctive type of sf native to their homeland, their selections say just as much about the current sf scene in Australia as *Northern Stars* does about sf in Canada.

The table of contents here doesn't tell quite the same immediate story as it did in *Northern Stars*, though. There are several recognizable names — George Turner, Greg Egan, Damien Broderick, Rosaleen Love, Terry Dowling — but most are known only sparingly here in the U.S. Only George Turner and Greg Egan have had the kind of widespread exposure here that William Gibson, Charles de Lint, Robert Charles Wilson, or Garfield Reeves-Stevens have enjoyed.

Nevertheless, the stories by the Australian Big Names are generally just as good as those by the well-known Canadians. George Turner's

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"Flowering Mandrake" — original to *Alien Shores* — is a tale of alien contact in the grand tradition. Turner captures the feeling of an alien viewpoint expertly; the intelligent extraterrestrial plant and its vegetal technology (including a wooden spaceship) are as engaging as any alien I've come across in years. In fact, the tragic ending achieves its power largely because the alien plant is so sympathetic and intriguing.

Greg Egan's "The Caress" (originally published in *Asimov's*) brings aesthetic theory into contact with genetic engineering technology, with odd and disturbing results. It gets a little B-movie-ish toward the end, but otherwise it's a chilling tale told with admirable skill. In "The Magi" — another reprint — Damien Broderick offers a moving story of a man searching for meaning and redemption; its Jesuits in Space backdrop recalls the work of Robert Silverberg and James Blish, and Broderick does as well with it as either of them would have.

Rosaleen Love's "Blue Venom" (from *Eidolon #6*) evokes the mood of Connie Willis's award-winning "At the Rialto," with its skewed, madcap view of a scientific conference full of personal intrigues and bizarre happenings. In "The Quiet Redemption of Andy the House" (from *Australian Short Stories #26*), Terry Dowling offers a very different sort of story from his Blue Tyson series, an affecting tale of a psychiatric patient and the doctors who want to help him. It asks, somehow managing not to seem sophomoric, what is sanity, anyway? Should we change someone who is happy the way they are just because they aren't like us?

As in *Northern Stars*, the good stories are not confined to the well-known names. Sean McMullen (whose first novel, *Voices in the Light*, Aphelion has also recently published) contributes "The Miocene Arrow," in which efforts to clone an ancient, intelligent species of extinct cetacean lead to unforeseen disaster (but not at all in the manner of *Jurassic Park*). Stephen Dedman's "Desired Dragons" is an impressive story of the interface between alien cultures, completely different from Turner's alien contact tale; it's easily one of the most intelligent and ambitious pieces in the book. Carole Nomarhas offers "Soul Horizon," a skilfully written story of far-future space intrigue. Leanne Frahm's "Land's End" takes a rather absurd idea — what if the surface of the land started slipping into the sea, towns and cities and all? — and makes a sensitive, elegiac story of it.

There are many good stories here, but they're a very different kind of good in general than the stories in *Northern Stars*. But for the stories by Broderick, Dedman, Love and a few

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others, the stories in *Alien Shores* share a sort of naive exuberance and unself-conscious straight-ahead storytelling that most of the Canadian pieces shunned — the kind of straight-faced nonliterary audacity that characterizes the sf of the Golden Age. Very few are told in the present tense, and they have such beguilingly direct openings: "The Pico Wars and the Atto War that followed, collectively known to both human and machine historians as the Information Conflict, were among the dullest in living memory," begins Chris Simmon's "Moon-Watcher Breaks the Bones." Frank Bryning's "MPR Crusoe" (a purely old-fashioned story of a space-working robot's ingenious efforts to survive a construction accident) starts: "Space rigger for the time being, on 'occupational trial', Multipurpose Robot Five switched off the reaction motor at his back and coasted in dead slow from seventy metres out." Several of them resort to simple time and/or place settings for their openings. Bill Dodds's "Mnemonic Plague" (from *Horizons Science Fiction*) begins: "10:75 AM Local Time." Kurt von Trojan's "The Man Who Snatched Marilyn's Body" opens: "Thursday, 9th, 1999." Lucy Sussex's "Kay & Phil" starts: "Midnight, 1961, in Point Reyes, California." Perhaps the best example of the relatively unsophisticated Australian style, the greatest contrast with the stories in *Northern Stars*, is the final piece, Jeff Harris's "Crash Jordan in the Art World of Drongo," an occasionally funny spoof of Flash Gordon which begins and ends with a bodily expulsion of gas. The beginning: "Crash Jordan belched." I won't detail the ending.

If the hallmark of Canadian sf was its blurring the lines between the literary and the genre, the central spirit of Australian sf seems to be the innocent enthusiasm and earnest gracelessness that characterizes many of the pieces in *Alien Shores*. That may sound negative, but it's not — these stories aren't told badly, nor do they feel dated or intentionally backward. They just feel free, without the self-conscious affectation that so much of the Canadian (and much U.S. and U.K.) sf displays. Reading *Alien Shores* was almost a relief, a rediscovery of the joys that I felt back when I first read the old Groff Conklin anthologies of sf from the 1930s and '40s. The Australian writers, by and large, revel in sf's anti-literary heritage, sticking to the virtues of no-nonsense storytelling and genre thrills unapologetically. They're a breath of fresh air after the literariness of *Northern Stars*.

Still, after more than 600 pages, I was getting a bit tired of the exuberance of pure storytelling, longing for a bit of metaphor or a hint of deeper intellectual ambition — looking back

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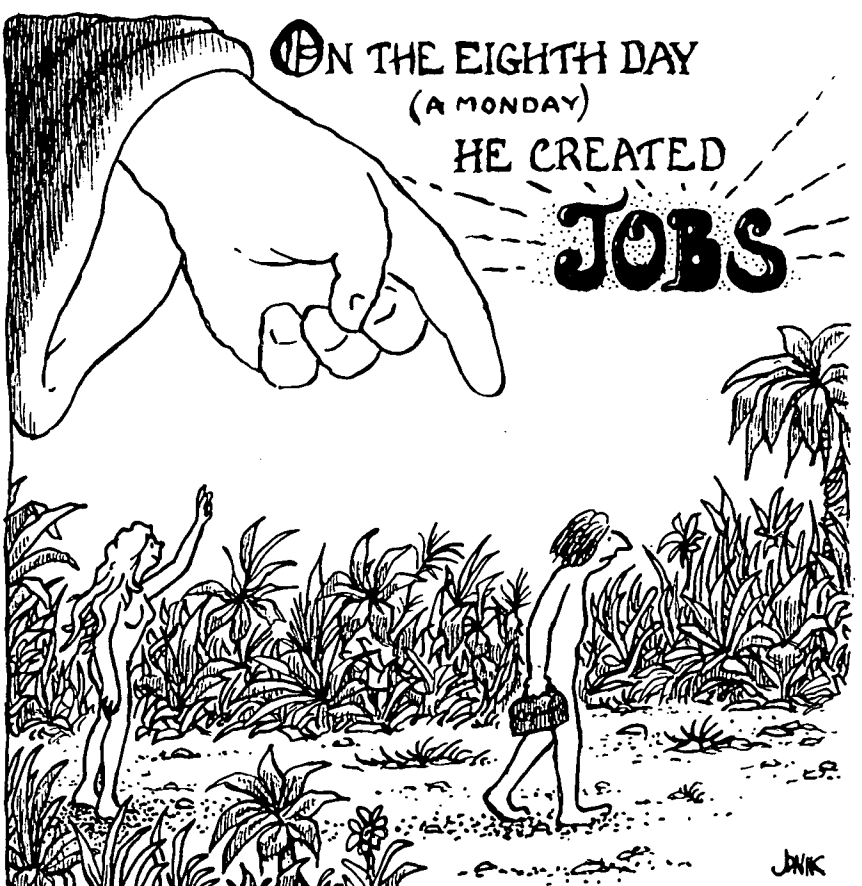
fondly at the Broderick and Dedman stories and wishing for more. I wouldn't want to read such a big book full of this type of story every week. But it was delightful to find that these unadulterated yarns could still get me. I'd thought that I'd lost the ability to appreciate sf without its latterday literary sophistication — at least, with the same pure pleasure I felt in earlier years — but *Alien Shores* reminded me of the peculiar power and unfettered thrills of the non-literary brand of sf. And if it could do that to a reader like me, whose eye more naturally turns to Gene Wolfe than Eando Binder, that's a pretty strong recommendation.



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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Art & Lies, by Jeanette Winterson, Knopf Canada, 1994, 215pp, Cdn $25.00, Hardcover.

WHAT A strange beast this is. But then a new Winterson novel is always a journey into a foreign landscape of story — which is one reason I so look forward to each new book of hers. From the first page, one never knows what to expect; only that the journey will be original and fascinating.

Last time out [*Written on the Body*, 1992] she chronicled an affair between a married woman and the narrator of the novel, coyly leaving it up to the reader to decide the narrator's gender. *Art & Lies* is more straightforward in terms of the gender of its characters but after that, all bets are off.

The story revolves around the separate narratives of:

Handel, a surgeon with a love for the finer things in life who laments the passing of his familiar England into a world of depressing chaos and an even more depressing orderliness. He is currently on a journey by rail, fleeing a botched operation and the past, carrying with him a found book that relates the story of:

Doll Sneerpiece, a fictional bawd, and her lust for a man some forty years younger than she. Doll's companion is a deaf woman named Miss Mangle who pretends she can hear perfectly well; whenever she feels a conversation warrants it, she pipes up with, "Very Right. Very True." Needless to say, this makes her a popular confidante.

There is also Picasso, not the artist of renown, but an artist all the same. She is a young woman who was born as Sophia; her art allowed her to survive a hellish childhood and early family life and she's now taking the same journey by rail as is Handel.

And then there is Sappho, the original Sappho, immortal it would seem, who describes herself plainly as "Lesbian *c.* 600 BC Occupation: Poet." Lesbian, as of the island of Lesbos, but also a lover of women, in

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particular the above-mentioned Sophia/Picasso.

Their separate lives collide, as one would hope disparate narratives in a novel will do, but they come together in a surprising fashion, puzzle pieces that inevitably interlock, though one might never have considered they would until the moment they are joined.

Winterson makes characterization and plotting seem effortless, but neither are her real forte. What keeps her admirers returning to her books, time and again, is her gift for language, the sheer boldness and lyric qualities of her prose. She breaks many of the rules of how one should tell a story (in this she reminds me of Keri Hulme, the New Zealand author of *The Bone People*), but she gets away with it because it works. At the same time, she finds room in her narrative for any amount of fascinating asides — explorations of the creative spirit, critiques of current social orders and the like — penning them so that they flow seamlessly through the conversations and thought processes of her characters.

The meaning of art and life and the interaction of personalities isn't revealed in *Art & Lies*, but Winterson raises all the right questions to keep the dialogue going, both on the pages of her novel and in the minds of her readers, and that seems, to me, to be more important.

Gun, with Occasional Music, by Jonathan Lethem, Tor Books, 1995, 272pp, $10.95, Trade paperback.

This, too, is a strange beast, but for entirely different reasons. Lethem opens with a Raymond Chandler quote as the book's epigraph, a few sentences that end with the line "...and the subject was as easy to spot as a kangaroo in a dinner jacket." Judging from the novel that follows, Lethem decided to take that last phrase literally and then wrote a book to explain it.

The style is that of a straightforward, hard-boiled PI novel, only it's set in the twenty-first century, a time when citizens are judged by how many karma points they have (hit zero and they put you in the deep-freeze for a few years); mutated animal-humans (hence the kangaroo in the dinner jacket) share the world with regular folks; and nobody asks questions (not for politeness' sake, but because it's the law) except for the Inquisitor's Office (the police) and licensed inquisitors (such as our PI hero).

Needless to say, there's a murder, our hero Conrad Metcalf investigates, the case keeps getting more complicated and all sorts of mayhem ensues. The writing's a bit stiff and the characters are certainly hard-boiled archetypes, but Lethem imbues it all with such inventiveness and detail that you can't help but be charmed. It's over the top, and

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certainly humorous in places, but the humor is often black, the excesses all seem to fit into the topsy-turvy world Lethem has invented, and in the end — like all good mystery novels — it says more about us and our time than it does about the fictional world in which it is set.

Lady Cottington's Pressed Fairy Book, by Brian Froud & Terry Jones, Turner Publishing, Inc., 1994, 62pp, $21.95, Hardcover.

There are no artist or author credits for *Lady Cottington's Pressed Fairy Book* unless you look at the copyright page. Because of this, when I first came across the book on the new release table in a bookstore, I flipped through its pages and was disappointed to see that someone was not only copying the signature style of British artist Brian Froud, but also seemed to be making fun of his beloved faeries while doing so.

(Froud, for those of you who might not be aware, created with fellow British artist Alan Lee one of the definitive fantasy art books of our field, *Faeries*; if you've been searching for an out-of-print copy, the good news is that it has recently been reprinted to coincide with the appearance of a series of short novels called *Faerielands* from Bantam Books featuring the work of various authors, their stories all based around a new set of faerie art by Froud. But I digress.)

I didn't pick up the book at the time I first saw it, but I did do so later when I realized that it was in fact Froud himself — along with one of the Monty Python crew, Terry Jones — who was responsible for the curious work in question. The book purports to be a facsimile of a diary by one Lady Cottington who, since she was a child, has pressed faeries in the pages of the book, much the way others will press flowers. So the art consists of these odd paintings of squished faerie with various looks of shock, surprise and dismay upon their features.

The text begins with an entry dated July 6th, 1895, when the child Lady Cottington was could barely string words together into a sentence, little say spell them, through to December 1912 when the faeries have disappeared from her life. At once poking fun at Froud's earlier work, the faerie photographs "authenticated" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the early part of this century (a premise wonderfully explored in Steve Szilahyi's 1992 novel *Photographing Fairies*), and perhaps even Edith Holden's *The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady*, in the end, the text proves to have more resonance than buffoonery.

The character of Lady Cottington as it unfolds is one that we can all well do without: the sort of person

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with such a blinkered vision, so wrapped up in the concept that the world revolves around herself, that she misses any sort of meaningful interaction she might have with other people. More to the point, she's the sort of person who believes beauty and wonder only have worth when one can collect and/or control them. By doing so, she misses out on their real worth — an old lesson, but a timely one, considering the rampant consumerism that presently has so many of us in thrall.

As for those squished faerie paintings, fans of Froud can rest assured that he hasn't suddenly turned his back on his earlier vision. When I asked him about his involvement in this project, he assured me that no actual faeries were pressed in the making of the book — only their psychic impressions were squashed and so imprinted in the page, with their approval of course, a point reiterated in the publisher's note at the beginning of the book.

Stonecutter, by Jon J. Muth & John Kuramoto, Donald M. Grant, 1994, 138pp, $11.95, Paperback.

Jon J. Muth's *Stonecutter* is about as different from the Froud/Jones collaboration as night is from day, except for the fact that it is again an artist's vision that required a prose collaborator to bring to fruition. The art is stark black and white, rendered with brush and ink in a style very reminiscent of Chinese brushwork, which would be apropos, since the story is based on a Chinese folktale. The fable related here is much more straightforward than the one told in the Froud/Jones book, but no less poignant and timely as we follow a stonecutter whose ambitions to be more important in the world eventually lead him back to his original

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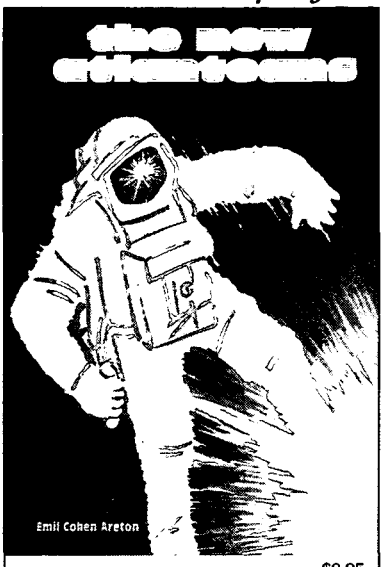

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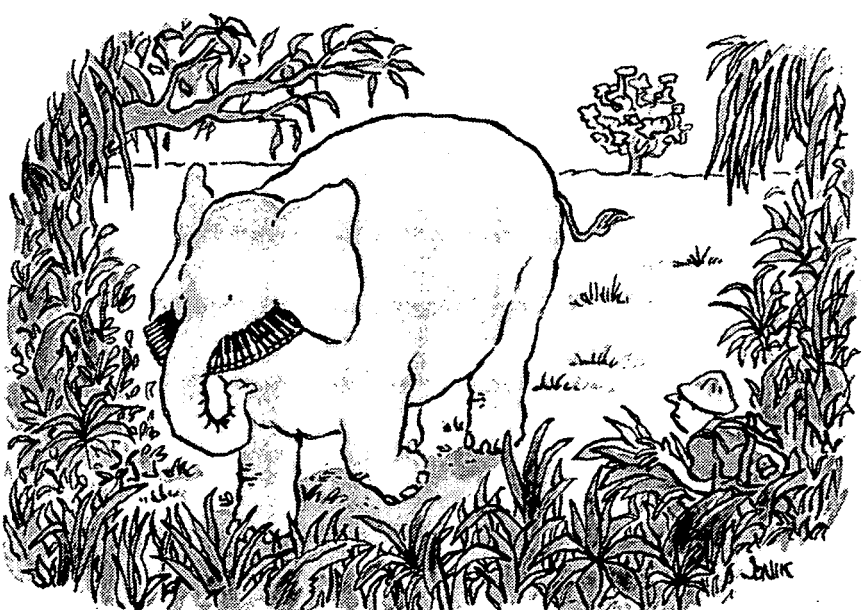
occupation. Muth's collaborator, John Kuramoto, has used words with the same stark simplicity as Muth's own brushwork and the book is a subsequent delight of understatement, both visually and in terms of its text.

As one might expect from a Donald M. Grant book, the presentation is exquisite. This particular book appears in three states: the small paperback described here; a signed edition of 500 copies; and a stunning art edition of 70 signed and numbered copies, hand bound with an original piece of art from the book, all presented in a hand-made wooden-box.

For ordering information, since Grant books are rarely to be found in a regular bookstore, write to: Donald M. Grant, Publisher, Inc., P.O. Box 187, Hampton Falls, NH 03844.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.



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We have been fortunate this last year to have several new Ray Bradbury stories cross our desk. The first, "From the Dust Returned," (September, 1994) sparked a lot of interest in readers and critics alike. The positive response continued with the publication of "Last Rites" in December.

"Another Fine Mess" is completely different from the first two. This is a ghost story — with a delightful twist.

Another Fine Mess

By Ray Bradbury

THE SOUNDS BEGAN IN THE middle of summer in the middle of the night.

Bella Winters sat up in bed about three a.m. and listened and then lay back down. Ten minutes later she heard the sounds again, out in the night, down the hill.

Bella Winters lived in a floor apartment on top of Vendome Heights, near Effie Street in Los Angeles, and had lived there now for only a few days, so it was all new to her, this old house on an old street with an old staircase, made of concrete, climbing steeply straight up from the lowlands below, one hundred and twenty steps, count them. And right now...

"Someone's on the steps," said Bella, to herself.

"What?" said her husband Sam in his sleep.

"There are some men out on the steps," said Bella. "Talking, yelling, not fighting, but almost. I heard them last night, too, and the night before, but..."

"What?" Sam muttered.

"Sh, go to sleep, I'll look."

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She got out of bed in the dark and went to the window, and yes, two men were indeed talking out there, grunting, groaning, now loud, now soft. And there was another noise, a kind of bumping, sliding, thumping like a huge object being carted up the hill.

"No one could be moving in at this hour of the night, could they?" asked Bella of the darkness, the window, and herself.

"No," murmured Sam.

"It sounds like..."

"Like what?" asked Sam, fully awake now.

"Like two men moving — "

"Moving what, for God's sake?"

"Moving a piano. Up those steps."

"At three in the *morning*!?"

"A piano and two men. Just listen."

The husband sat up, blinking, alert.

Far off, in the middle of the hill, there was a kind of harping strum, the noise a piano makes when suddenly thumped and its harp strings hum.

"There, did you *hear*?"

"Jesus, you're right. But why would anyone steal — "

"They're not stealing, they're delivering."

"A *piano*?"

"I didn't make the rules, Sam. Go out and ask. No, don't, I will."

And she wrapped herself in her robe and was out the door and on the sidewalk.

"Bella," Sam whispered fiercely, behind the porch screen. "Crazy."

"So what can happen to a woman fifty-five, fat and ugly at night?" she wondered.

Sam did not answer.

She moved quietly to the rim of the hill. Somewhere down there she could hear the two men wrestling with a huge object. The piano on occasion gave a strumming hum and fell silent. Occasionally one of the men yelled or gave orders.

"The voices," said Bella. "I know them from somewhere," she whispered and moved in utter dark on stairs that were only a long pale ribbon going down, as a voice echoed:

"Here's *another* fine mess you've got us in."

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Bella froze. Where have I heard that voice, she wondered, a million *times*!

"Hello," she called.

She moved, counting the steps, and stopped.

And there was no one there.

Suddenly she was very cold. There was nowhere for the strangers to have gone. The hill was steep and a long way down and a long way up, and they had been burdened with an upright piano, *hadn't* they?

How come I know *upright*? she thought. I only *heard*. But — yes, *upright*! Not only that, but inside a box!

She turned slowly and as she went back up the steps, one by one, slowly, slowly the voices began to sound again, below, as if, disturbed, they had waited for her to go away.

"What *are* you doing?" demanded one voice.

"I was just — " said the other.

"*Give* me that!" cried the first voice.

That *other* voice, thought Bella, I know that, *too*. And I know what's going to be said next!

"Now," said the echo far down the hill in the night, "just don't stand there, *help* me!"

"Yes!" Bella closed her eyes and swallowed hard and half fell to sit on the steps, getting her breath back as black and white pictures flashed in her head. Suddenly it was 1929 and she was very small, in a theater with dark and light pictures looming above the first row where she sat, transfixed, and then laughing, and then transfixed and laughing again.

She opened her eyes. The two voices were still down there, a faint wrestle and echo in the night, despairing and thumping each other with their hard derby hats.

Zelda, thought Bella Winters. I'll call Zelda. She knows everything. She'll tell me what this is. Zelda, yes!

Inside she dialed Z and E and L and D and A before she saw what she had done and started over. The phone rang a long while until Zelda's voice, angry with sleep, spoke halfway across L.A.

"Zelda, this is Bella!"

"Sam just *died*?"

"No, no, I'm sorry — "

"*You're* sorry?"

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"Zelda, I know you're going to think I'm crazy, but..."

"Go ahead, be crazy."

"Zelda, in the old days, when they made films around L.A. they used lots of places, right? Like Venice, Ocean Park..."

"Chaplin did, Langdon did, Harold Lloyd, sure."

"Laurel and Hardy?"

"What?"

"Laurel and Hardy, did *they* use lots of locations."

"Palms, they used Palms lots, Culver City Main Street, Effie Street."

"*Effie* Street!"

"Don't yell, Bella."

"Did you say *Effie* Street?"

"Sure, and God, it's three in the morning!"

"Right at the *top* of Effie Street!?"

"Hey, yeah, the stairs. Everyone knows them. That's where the music box chased Hardy down hill and ran over him."

"Sure, Zelda, *sure*! Oh God, Zelda, if you could *see*, hear, what *I* hear!"

Zelda was suddenly wide awake on the line. "What's going *on*? You *serious*?"

"Oh God, yes. On the steps just now, and last night and the night before maybe, I heard, I hear — two men hauling a — a piano up the hill."

"Someone's pulling your leg!"

"No, no, they're there. I go out and there's nothing. But the steps are haunted, Zelda! One voice says: 'Here's another fine mess you got us in.' You got to *hear* that man's voice!"

"You're drunk and doing this because you know I'm a nut for them."

"No, no. Come, Zelda. Listen. Tell!"

Maybe half an hour later, Bella heard the old tin lizzie rattle up the alley behind the apartments. It was a car Zelda, in her joy at visiting silent movie theaters, had bought to lug herself around in while she wrote about the past, always the past, and steaming into Cecil B. De Mille's old place or circling Harold Lloyd's nationstate, or cranking and banging around the Universal backlot, paying her respects to the Phantom's opera stage, or sitting on Ma and Pa Kettle's porch chewing a sandwich lunch. That was Zelda, who once wrote in a silent country in a silent time for *Silver Screen*.

Zelda lumbered across the front porch, a huge body with legs as big as the

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Bernini columns out front of St. Peter's in Rome, and a face like a harvest moon.

On that round face now was suspicion, cynicism, skepticism, in equal pie-parts. But when she saw Bella's pale stare she cried:

"Bella!"

"You *see* I'm *not* lying!" said Bella.

"I *see*!"

"Keep your voice down, Zelda. Oh, it's scary and strange, terrible and nice. So come on."

And the two women edged along the walk to the rim of the old hill near the old steps in old Hollywood and suddenly as they moved they felt time take a half turn around them and it was another year, because nothing had changed, all the buildings were the way they were in 1928 and the hills beyond like they were in 1926 and the steps, just the way they were when the cement was poured in 1921.

"Listen, Zelda. *There*!"

And Zelda listened and at first there was only a creaking of wheels down in the dark, like crickets, and then a moan of wood and a hum of piano strings, and then one voice lamenting about this job, and the other voice claiming he had nothing to do with it, and then the thumps as two derby hats fell, and an exasperated voice announced:

"Here's *another* fine mess you've got us in."

Zelda, stunned, almost toppled off the hill. She held tight to Bella's arm as tears brimmed in her eyes.

"It's a trick. Someone's got a tape recorder or — "

"No, I checked. Nothing but the steps, Zelda, the steps!"

Tears rolled down Zelda's plump cheeks.

"Oh, God, that *is* his voice! I'm the expert, I'm the mad fanatic, Bella. That's Ollie. And that other voice, Stan! And you're *not* nuts after all!"

The voices below rose and fell and one cried: "Why don't you do something to *help* me?"

Zelda moaned. "Oh, God, it's so *beautiful*."

"What does it mean?" asked Bella. "Why are they here? Are they really ghosts, and why would ghosts climb this hill every night, pushing that music box, night on night, tell me, Zelda, why?"

Zelda peered down the hill and shut her eyes a moment to think. "Why do *any* ghosts go anywhere? Retribution? Revenge? No, not *those* two. Love

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maybe's the reason, lost loves or something. *Yes*?"

Bella let her heart pound once or twice and then said, "Maybe nobody *told* them."

"Told them *what*?"

"Or maybe they were told a lot but still didn't believe because maybe in their old years things got bad, I mean they were sick, and sometimes when you're sick you forget."

"Forget *what*!?"

"How much we loved them."

"They *knew*!"

"*Did* they? Sure, we told each other, but maybe not enough of us ever wrote or waved when they passed and just yelled 'love!' you think?"

"Hell, Bella, they're on TV every *night*!"

"Yeah, but that don't count. Has anyone, since they left us, come here to these steps and *said*? Maybe those voices down there, ghosts or whatever, have been here every night for years, pushing that music box, and nobody thought, or tried, to just whisper or yell all the love we had all the years. Why not?"

"Why not?" Zelda stared down into the long darkness where perhaps shadows moved and maybe a piano lurched clumsily between the shadows. "You're right."

"If I'm right," said Bella, "and you say so, there's only one thing to do — "

"You mean you and *me*?"

"Who else? Quiet. Come on."

They moved down a step. In the same instant lights came on around them, in a window here, another there. A screen door opened somewhere and angry words shot out in the night:

"Hey, what's going *on*?"

"Pipe down!"

"You know what *time* it is?"

"My God," Bella whispered, "everyone *else* hears now!"

"No, no," Zelda looked around, wildly. "They'll spoil everything!"

"I'm calling the cops!" A window slammed.

"God," said Bella, "if the cops come — "

"What?"

"It'll be all wrong. If anyone's going to tell them to take it easy, pipe down, it's gotta be us. We *care*, *don't* we?"

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"God, yes, but — "

"No buts. Grab on. Here we go."

The two voices murmured below and the piano tuned itself with hiccoughs of sound as they edged down another step and another, their mouths dry, hearts hammering and the night so dark they could only see the faint street light at the stair bottom, the single street illumination so far away it was sad being there all by itself, waiting for shadows to move.

More windows slammed up, more screen doors opened. At any moment there would be an avalanche of protest, incredible outcries, perhaps shots fired, and all this gone forever.

Thinking this, the women trembled and held tight, as if to pummel each other to speak against the rage.

"Say something, Zelda, quick."

"*What*?"

"Anything! They'll get hurt if we don't — "

"*They*?"

"You know what I mean. Save them."

"Okay. Jesus!" Zelda froze, clamped her eyes shut to find the words then opened her eyes and said, "Hello."

"Louder."

"Hello," Zelda called softly, then loudly.

Shapes rustled in the dark below. One of the voices rose while the other fell and the piano strummed its hidden harpstrings.

"Don't be afraid,"Zelda called.

"That's good. Go on."

"Don't be afraid," Zelda called, braver now. "Don't listen to those others yelling. We won't hurt you. It's just us. I'm Zelda, you wouldn't remember, and this here is Bella, and we've known you forever, or since we were kids, and we love you. It's late, but we thought you should know. We've loved you ever since you were in the desert or on that boat with ghosts or trying to sell Christmas trees door to door or in that traffic where you tore the headlights off cars, and we still love you, right, Bella?"

The night below was darkness, waiting.

Zelda punched Bella's arm.

"Yes!" Bella cried, "what she *said*. We love you."

"We can't think of anything else to say."

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"But it's enough, yes?" Bella leaned forward, anxiously. "It's *enough*?"

A night wind stirred the leaves and grass around the stairs and the shadows below that had stopped moving with the music box suspended between them as they looked up and up at the two women who suddenly began to cry. First tears fell from Bella's cheeks and when Zelda sensed them, let fall her own.

"So now, said Zelda, amazed that she could form words but managed to speak anyway, "we want you to know, you don't have to come back anymore. You don't have to climb the hill every night, waiting. For what we said just now is it, isn't it? I mean you wanted to hear it here on this hill, with those steps, and that piano, yes, that's the whole thing, it had to be that, didn't it? So now here we are and there you are and it's said. So rest, dear friends. "

"Oh there, Ollie," added Bella, in a sad sad whisper. "Oh Stan, Stanley."

The piano, hidden in the dark, softly hummed its wires and creaked its ancient wood.

And then the most incredible thing happened. There was a series of shouts and then a huge banging crash as the music box, in the dark, rocketed down the hill skittering on the steps, playing chords where it hit, swerving, rushing, and ahead of it, running, the two shapes pursued by the musical beast, yelling, tripping, shouting, warning the Fates, crying out to the gods, down and down, forty, sixty, eighty, one hundred steps.

And half-down the steps, hearing, feeling, shouting, crying themselves, and now laughing and holding to each other, the two women alone in the night wildly clutching, grasping, trying to see, almost sure that they *did* see, the three things ricocheting off and away, the two shadows rushing, one fat, one thin, and the piano blundering after, discordant and mindless, until they reached the street where, instantly, the one overhead street lamp died as if struck, and the shadows floundered on, pursued by the musical beast.

And the two women abandoned, looked down, exhausted with laughing until they wept and weeping until they laughed, until suddenly Zelda got a terrible look on her face as if shot.

"My God!" she shouted in panic, reaching out. "Wait. We didn't mean, we don't want — don't go *forever*! Sure, go, so the neighbors here sleep. But once a year, you *hear*? Once a year, one night a year from tonight, and every year after that, come back. It shouldn't bother anyone so much. But we got to tell you all over again, huh? Come back and bring the box with you, and

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we'll be here waiting, won't we, Bella?"

"Waiting, yes."

There was a long silence from the steps leading down into an old black-and-white silent Los Angeles.

"You think they heard?"

They listened.

And from somewhere far off and down there was the faintest explosion like the engine of an old jalopy knocking itself to life, and then the merest whisper of a lunatic music from a dark theater when they were very young. It faded.

After a long while they climbed back up the steps, dabbing at their eyes with wet Kleenex. Then they turned for a final time to stare down into the night.

"You know something?" said Zelda. "I think they *heard*."

"Somehow, I didn't think there would be any need for therapy here."

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Linda Nagata's first novel, The Bohr Maker, *has just arrived on bookstore stands.* The Bohr Maker *is set in the same world as her short story "The Liberator" (June, 1993), which is currently on the preliminary Nebula ballot. Her second novel,* Tech-Heaven, *will appear in December. Bantam will publish both books.*

"Old Mother" is set near Linda's home in the Kula District of Maui. "The persimmon farms and the views and the cloudscapes are all real," she writes, "though the snakes are (so far) fictional. Unfortunately, people are constantly trying to illegally smuggle 'pet' reptiles into Hawaii, and it wouldn't surprise me in the least if a snake population became established here over the next one hundred years."

Old Mother

By Linda Nagata

LONG STRINGS OF FIRE-crackers sparked and exploded in the moment of the New Year, roaring across the seaside pavilion like an assault of armies. The violent odor of gunpowder invaded the clouds of salt spray thrown up by the huge combers that boomed against the beach: a baseline rhythm for the drums and gongs that drove the lion to dance. The lion was a fantastic animal, fifteen feet from nose to tail, neurocell plastic glittering white and red and gold, great green eyes winking under heavy lashes, huge maw snapping open and shut as it charged about the crowd pursuing invisible demons. Asha ducked and stumbled backward, laughing, as the lion raced past her. Clay caught her; stood her back up on her feet again with a grin. The drums pounded a blood rhythm into her head, a pulse that hammered at her doubt. She crowed with a hundred other voices when the the lion reared up on its hind legs to roar at the stars winking overhead.

The stars, the stars. They teased her in the night, faint and shimmering in mystery. Never confuse the stars with the planets. The planets were bright

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and close and too well understood. But the stars...no one had ever tried for the stars before. That would soon change. This time tomorrow she'd be off on the first leg of her journey to *Dragon* — the almost-living biometal ship that had been growing in orbit for five years. All was ready now.

"Time to make the offering!" Clay shouted over the thunder of surf and drums. *A farmer would remember that,* Asha thought. Even in the new century, it didn't hurt a farmer to pay attention to luck and omens and gods.

Nodding, she reached into her skirt pocket. Little rectangles of gold foil were already shimmering in the torch light, held over the heads of the crowd by eager hands. Asha added her own to the glitter. Clay's strong hand encircled hers, left over right. For luck, for prosperity. She smiled and leaned against him, feeling the strength of the land in his body, his lean muscles like the binding roots of the orchard he tended on his grandmother's farm. For a moment, fear glittered in her sight like starlight on broken glass. But she turned away from it. That was for tomorrow. Tonight they would dance together to the rhythm of the drums.

The lion was working the other side of the crowd now. She could see its handler, seated behind the musicians, studying a video display of the pavilion, directing the lion's dance with the aid of a collision avoidance program. And his partner beside him — Clay's grandmother, Electra — a dark and heavy old artist in a flowing blue dress who used smart paint and guile to make lifeless things suddenly seem alive. Around Electra, reality became slippery. Any inanimate object could suddenly awaken to a new and animate identity. Nothing was fixed. Nothing was quantifiable. She'd raised Clay in a world in which dreamtime could hardly be distinguished from the waking state.

Asha's gaze fixed on Electra's wide, brown face, on her dark eyes that managed to scowl despite the joyful bend of her mouth. Clay had been nothing more than a bit of embryonic tissue when his grandmother had taken him in. She'd raised him in her womb, nursed him at her breast, filled him with her own primal vision of the land as a mother-deity and they'd been happy — until Asha came along.

From across the pavilion Electra seemed to sense Asha's gaze. Her head turned; triumph sparked in her eyes. Then a drunk tourist whirled across Asha's line of sight, blonde hair flying as she spun her own dance to the New Year. Asha tipped her head back to look over her shoulder at Clay. He misread her mood and kissed her, his scraggly black mustache rough against her lips.

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"You two ought to be married!"

Asha looked around, startled to see the blonde tourist swaying in front of her. The woman lifted a lei of knotted hala leaves from around her own shoulders and held it up with a brilliant smile. Then she reached out and quickly tied it around Clay and Asha's outstretched hands, binding them tightly together. "Make your offering to the lion," she advised. "And leave the bondage on until it falls off naturally. Then you'll be married well and long. I guarantee it! And I am a licensed witch!"

She whirled away to spread her benedictions elsewhere, while their friends laughed around them. "You have to marry him now, Asha!" "Go for it, Clay!" "Do it for real! Log it on the P.A. net." *Do it, do it, do it,* the chant started at once on all sides. Then the lion charged. People screamed and fell back. The great beast wove up and down against the straining crowd, its mouth snapping shut over gold foil after gold foil. "Feed the lion," Clay intoned in her ear.

Together they extended their offering. Asha stared at their bound hands for a moment, touched by a sense of wonder. Clay's hand was trembling as it closed over hers.

Suddenly, multicolored jets of flame ignited overhead. Paper lanterns began to burn with the ferocity of rocket fuel. The lion snorted in fear and bounded backward while Asha ducked instinctively, pulling Clay down with her. Within seconds the fire cut through the rope that suspended the lanterns above the pavilion. The rope fell to the concrete floor in neat, arm-length sections that began to writhe, gleaming and hissing and rearing up, forked tongues tasting the sudden scent of fear. Asha recognized the arrow-head and spiny tail of death adders, serpents that had long ago cut a niche for themselves in the island's deranged ecology. The crowd gasped and fell back before the snakes' collective gaze. For a moment silence engulfed the pavilion while the angry snakes flattened their coils against the ground and debated attack. But they waited too long. The lion had recovered. It charged toward the line of death adders on great, padded feet. They seemed to sense it and turned as if to flee, but too late. The lion caught them and crushed them. One-by-one they exploded in purple fire under its trampling feet, each ignition accompanied by hysterical screams of approval from the crowd. Asha's throat was raw with her own passion as she cheered the destruction of what must be Electra's artful demons.

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"The lion!" Clay cried, reminding her why they were there. And suddenly it was upon them.

Clay yanked their bound hands up with the offering and the lion's maw flew open like double doors slammed wide. Its red tongue lolled. It pounced upon the foil, its jaws slamming shut bare millimeters from their fingertips. The offering slipped out of their hands. The lion batted its brilliant green eyes and moved on.

Asha sagged against Clay, a grin on her face and a sense of elation in her heart. Across the pavilion Electra wore an expression that made her death adders seem almost kind.

"YOU HAVE to do it," Stuart said seriously. "I've heard of that witch. She has a lot of celebrity clients. They say she gives good advice." Like Asha, Stuart was Cured. But he'd been on Maui only six months.

"Do it," Kemmy agreed. Another Cured, on her last month before eviction back to the Celestial Cities. "Make the marriage official. You know you want to."

"But it won't work," Asha said softly. She glanced at Clay from under lowered eyes...an unCured farmer rooted to his land. He'd said nothing since they'd made their offering to the lion. He sat on the picnic bench, staring at their bound hands clasped together on the table. Of the mixed emotions on his face, worry was the one she recognized most clearly.

The euphoria of the dance had faded for her too, leaving behind only a great hollow fear of the morning's reality. She bit her lip. "How can we do it? Tomorrow — no, it's already today — today will be our last day togeth — "

Clay flinched. But Atlanta laughed. "What's tomorrow? Tomorrow may never come."

"For you," Asha whispered, knowing no one would hear over the surf. Atlanta was unCured. Time was more uncertain for her. She'd lived near the beach at Makena since she was seven and she'd go on living there until she'd used up all her tomorrows and died of old age.

The Cured had made a different deal. They'd bought youth. Didn't cost much. Just their land, their homes. Whatever bound them to Mother Earth. Cost calculated on a sliding scale according to net worth. *We turn no one down.*

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Youth, and a luxury apartment in the Celestial Cities. Fair enough, Asha thought. Old Mother had no room for ageless geezers determined to live forever. Asha reckoned they were lucky to get one year in ten in the cradle. But her year was up. New Year's Day. Vacation over. Time to move on — without Clay. She'd chosen *Dragon*, and if she ever came home again, it would not be in Clay's lifetime.

She sighed deeply. To love a man who refused to take the Cure, who was as tightly rooted to the Earth as the trees he tended on his grandmother's farm: it was absurd, and yet it *was*. Until it all ended tomorrow.

The chant started up around them again: *Do it, do it, do it.* So-called friends feeding like psychological vampires on their dilemma. *Do it, do it, do it.* For they wanted a fine, romantic story to tell in the years to come.

Still, Clay said nothing.

Asha felt hands at her elbows. "Come on! There's a public access booth on the corner." Sheer force of numbers moved them. Clay didn't resist. Asha didn't want to. By the time they reached the booth, someone had already called up the wedding contract and filled in the blanks from their public access bios.

"All it takes is your signature!" Stuart shoved a screen pen into Asha's hand.

She held it, open-mouthed, while her eyes scanned the contract. They couldn't do this. She knew it was wrong. Marriage was not meant to last only a day.

Then Clay took the pen out of her hand and signed. He studied his signature for a moment, his face uncertain, bemused. Then he looked at her, the expectation in his eyes bordering on fear. Asha knew they were making a mistake. But she could not disappoint those eyes. She took the proffered pen and signed. The computer downloaded the contract with their signatures into the public access net. The screen cleared. A new message appeared: *Congratulations to the new Mr. & Mrs.!*

Morning found them in Clay's room at his grandmother's farm house. Asha had awakened here many times over the long summer and fall, so that the scene held for her a pleasant familiarity. Outside, she knew, the air would be crisp and cold this far up the flank of the old volcano. But Clay's room was warm and pleasant.

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Clay was still asleep. But he must have been awake earlier, because someone had told the curtains to open, admitting the blindingly bright rays of the morning sun as it climbed over the mountain's shoulder. Asha stretched, blinking in the sunshine. A few meters beyond the window was the upper persimmon orchard. It covered the rising slopes of the old farm for nearly half a mile. The trees' knobby gray limbs draped their supporting scaffoldings, stark and leafless in winter.

Asha lifted her head. Her long black hair was matted with dried perspiration and smelled of smoke. It fell about her brown shoulders in a tangled mane. She smiled at Clay as he lay on his back, his left hand twisted around on the pillow where it was joined to her right. It had been interesting making love with that bondage. Using the toilet had been a bit embarrassing. But she imagined they could make up for that in the shower. She giggled and nuzzled his chest to wake him. "Clay."

His eyes opened briefly, then squeezed shut again. He threw his arm over his face. Then he sat up suddenly, grinning. He checked their bondage and looked at her. "It was real."

She nodded slowly, unwilling to look further ahead than this moment. He leaned over and kissed her. The sun seemed to press them together with a heat that threatened to melt and mingle their bodies. But after a few minutes, Clay pulled away. He leaned back against the pillow with a sigh, his dark eyes half-closed in the light. "How I love the sun," he mused. He raised his bound hand and hers, studying the knotted hala cord in the sunshine. Abruptly, his idle smile winked out. "The house doesn't know your voice. How'd you open the curtains?"

"I didn't. I thought you did."

His eyes widened in sudden fear. Startled, Asha followed his gaze to the hala cord. It seemed to shimmer for a moment. Then the green color flowed out of it, as if sucked out by the sunlight. It turned a tired gray with darker stripings. It developed scales. Angry eyes glittered in a tiny, arrow-head. A baby death adder, wrapped twice around their wrists, its slit of a mouth biting its own bony tail with needle-sharp teeth.

Asha gasped and yanked her hand away from the hated thing. The snake disintegrated. It fell across the bed in a thousand tattered shreds of hala leaf.

The bond was broken.

Asha found herself crouched like a cat on the foot of the bed, her breath

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tearing in and out of her lungs. Clay was on the floor, his left hand still extended toward her. He looked at her in shock that quickly hardened into anger. Leaping to his feet, he threw his head back and bellowed, *"Grandmother!"*

"Clay — "

He turned to her, teeth bared. "It was Grandmother."

Asha nodded slowly. The old lady had shown off her talents last night. "It was the sunlight. She must have sprayed the substrate on while we were sleeping, and the program was activated by sunlight." As if by explaining the vision, she could make it less real.

"You two had no right to make this marriage."

Asha flinched at the unexpected voice. Clay's grandmother was standing in the door. Asha slipped off the bed, pulling a blanket around her body. Electra was a tall, imposing woman — unCured — and unbent by age or disappointment. Her thick gray hair, swept up on her head and bound with a string of cowry shells, emphasized her regal carriage. A lifetime spent in this farmhouse, watching friends and family give in to fear or doubt and move away, take the Cure, had left a tang of bitterness in her personality, like the aftertaste of medicinal tea. But she'd hung on, thriving on a profound sense of place, on a certainty that she was no entity unto herself but that her consciousness flowed into the land and the consciousness of the land into her in a relationship that would not tolerate physical separation, and that couldn't be bettered by the simple longevity promised by the Cure. Her gaze skewered Asha. "You're a thief," she said, in a voice filled with quiet menace. "You came here, and accepted my hospitality, all the while contriving to steal my legacy."

Then she turned her wrath on Clay. "And you. What do you mean by this marriage? Do you mean to go away from here? Do you mean to seek the Cure and leave me and this farm? You are the last one, Clay. The last one. All my children have betrayed me and left this land that nurtured them. Are you going to leave too?"

Clay crumpled before her like hollow aluminum under a fist. "It's not like that, Grandmother. You know I'd never leave." He glanced nervously at Asha. "She's my wife now. She can stay with me until I die. Won't you, Asha?"

Asha felt her mouth open. Tears started in her eyes.

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Electra took one look at her face and hissed in disgust. "She won't stay with you. Look at her. She'll be gone before the sun sets and she'll never set foot on this land again." She stomped her hefty heel and turned to go. "You belong to this land, Clay," she called over her shoulder. "Your life is here."

Asha listened to the soft thump of footsteps as Electra walked barefoot down the hallway of the sprawling house. When silence had descended once again, she turned to Clay. "We have to talk — "

Her words seemed to break him from a trance. "I don't want to talk!" he screamed at her. He grabbed his pants from the back of the chair and stepped into them, the armor weave hugging his thighs like a second skin.

"Clay — !"

He yanked a stained and tattered sweater over his head. "Get dressed," he growled. "And get out. Go away now because I don't want to see you again." He slammed open the back door of the bedroom and stomped into the boots that were waiting outside on the porch.

"Clay, wait!" she pleaded with him. But she might have spoken to the wind. He leaped off the porch and took off running through the orchard, flushing a bevy of doves from the frost-burned kikuyu grass under the leafless trees.

ASHA FOUND him nearly an hour later at the top of the orchard, seated on the ground with his back against one of the trees, pruning shears idle in his hands while he stared out at a view that encompassed the house and the lower orchard, and below that, in a vista that seemed to fall away forever, the isthmus of Maui thirty-five hundred feet below, and onward, the western mountains and the long blue march of the sea. A grand, pastoral spectacle that never failed to stir in Asha a sense of awe. *Yet I'm leaving.* In this moment, her intention seemed nonsensical. There could be no finer home in all the Universe than right here with Clay. Yet she remained determined to go. In the light of paradise her innate restless nature was revealed: a kind of insanity.

Clay refused to look up as she approached. She ducked under the scaffolding that supported the gnarled tree limbs and crouched down beside him. Thick clouds had come up since the blazing sunrise. They clung to the upper slope of the old volcano, white and gray and deepest black, so close

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overhead that the farm, less than halfway up the mountain's flank, seemed perched under a roof at the top of the world.

Asha loved this mountain. She'd been born in a house less than five miles from here, had spent much of her childhood on the slopes of this volcano. But when she was eleven, her parents had sought the Cure, taking her with them to live in the Celestial Cities. A year ago she'd acquired a special pass, and come back, to spend her last days on Earth while *Dragon* was readied. With all the world to choose from, she'd returned to this mountain. It was home, she realized. It always would be. More so now than ever.

As she looked at Clay, she could feel her heart begin to race even above the accelerated pace it had taken for the climb. "Your grandmother's right," she said. "I am a thief. I do want you. It's not too late to change your mind. There's room on *Dragon* for you. You know I've made it so."

He stared glumly downslope, making no answer. Her fists clenched in frustration. Didn't he realize she had to leave by sunset? How could the unCured be so profligate with time/ She reached down, brushed aside a layer of dead leaves with her hand and plunged her fingers into the soft soil, pulling out a fistful of dirt. "Look at this, Clay." She grabbed his hand and poured the cold soil into his palm. "This is what you're suffering for. Dirt. Earth. Soil. You were even named for it! *Clay.*"

His fist closed over the rich, dark earth. He finally turned to look at her. "I'm just a simple farmer, Asha. I belong here with the land. Why can't you understand that?"

She looked up at the heavy clouds. She could feel their cold, moist breath blowing down on her — an ineffective draught against the heat of her rising anger. She knocked the dirt out of his hand. "I wish this mountain could conjure up one last lava flow — aimed right across this farm! Maybe that would free you from this place."

He rubbed his palm against his pants to wipe the remaining dirt away. Then he took her hand in his. "You came to *me*, Asha. I didn't seek you out. You came here to my island, my home, and you made me love you. Now you want to change everything I am, everything I stand for. But why should I change for you? You've taken the Cure. You have forever to live. Would it hurt you so much to stay here a single lifetime, and keep me company while I die?"

His hand felt warm and rough against her own. She imagined this hand

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growing older, more calloused, as the years rolled by and old age slowly claimed him. What would it be like to live a lifetime with him? To watch him grow old and weak and weary while her own youth remained as constant as the stars. She shivered, knowing she could never endure it, knowing that she would nag him every day to seek the Cure until the love between them finally soured into hate. *Dragon* would be long gone without her, and she still would not have Clay.

"Walk with me," Clay said.

She nodded. They sidled out from under the tree, then walked hand in hand past the upper boundary of the orchard. She paused by a rock outcropping on the edge of the forest. The successive bands of two ancient lava flows and one ash fall could easily be counted in the exposed rock. Clay had chiseled off the weathered gray surface of both bands, carving the black rock underneath into intricate scenes of farm life: planting, spring growth, the constant battle with birds and insects, the harvest, the bare branches of winter and children playing amongst the trees. That last bit was purely imaginary. Clay had been the last child to grow up on this farm. She touched the scene wistfully. His skill astounded her. Yet his stubbornness made her want to cry in frustration. For Clay would never carve a free stone. He used his art only on the substrate, on the structure of the mountain itself so that his work could never be moved from the land.

Perhaps she was foolish to try to shake him loose; perhaps that's what she loved in him. Certainly there was a seduction in his permanence, a dreamlike quality in the smooth, predictable pattern that had been laid down for his life.

He tugged at her hand impatiently. He hadn't brought her here to see his art. They walked on through the forest of black wattle, their boots crunching against a thin carpet of tiny fallen leaves and seed pods. Daylight dimmed under the closely spaced trees. The trunks overhead creaked against each other as the wind stirred their tops.

"If I took the Cure I'd have to leave this land," Clay said. "I'd have to ask permission to return, obtain a special permit just to visit this farm once every ten years. And it wouldn't even be mine anymore. Can you see me living in an apartment in one of the Celestial Cities?"

She tried to imagine it, but the image wouldn't gel. "No," she admitted. "But we won't be living in the CC. We're bound for another world, Clay, one that no one has ever seen before — "

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"As beautiful as this one?" Clay asked. "My family has lived on this land for five generations — "

Asha yanked her hand out of his in a sudden surge of anger. "They've all left!" she said. "All but you and your grandmother. Even your parents ran out on you. Before you were born. They paid for their freedom with you, Clay. They gave you to your grandmother as *solace* when they abandoned her for the Cure. Have you ever seen your mother? Do you ever hear from her? And where are you going to get a wife? Except for a few nostalgic tourists like me, this island is almost abandoned! What's the point of staying on? To grow old without children. To be the last beat of a generational rhythm that will end with your death."

Clay's eyes flashed. "There *are* families left; women who believe in the old ways. Atlanta for one — "

"Then what are you doing here with me?"

His anger faded. A bemused smile crossed his lips and he shrugged helplessly. "What's a simple man supposed to do, when his heart is stolen by the cruel hand of a heavenly goddess?"

"*You* are cruel," she answered resentfully. "I've never taken anything from you that you didn't offer willingly."

He shrugged, as if that didn't count. "Come. I want to show you something."

They came to the edge of a steep ravine, one of many that ran like wrinkles of age down the face of the mountain. He followed a faint track down, a deer trail she guessed, that skirted sheer cliffs and crumbling slopes. If there were any snakes around, surely they'd flee at the noise.

She saw no more of his carvings, though there was abundant exposed rock. At the bottom, dragonflies hovered and dipped over a few stagnant pools left by the last rain.

Clay began to climb the other side. She looked after him in dismay. "Clay, you're not serious." The whole far side of the ravine was covered with a thicket of blackberries. Asha had no desire to challenge those brambles...or the slithery creatures she felt sure must abide there.

"It's not far," Clay said, looking back over his shoulder. "And I've cut a path. Come on."

The "path" was little more than a rabbit run. She had to crawl on all fours, and the brambles still grabbed at her sweater and caught her hair. She

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cursed as a thorn pierced her palm, but she struggled on, until she found Clay crouched in front of a dark hole on the precarious slope. As she came up, he turned around without a word and wriggled through the hole, his shoulders scraping the edges as he squeezed through. "Clay!" she cried, as he disappeared inside.

She hesitated. She did not like small dark places. And for the first time in their relationship she was afraid of what he might intend. She listened to the mournful sound of the wind in the trees; the angry buzzing of a solitary yellow jacket. Then she cursed again, and followed him into the cave.

The entrance was a narrow crevice, taller than it was wide. She could fit through on her belly, but barely. Clay must have wriggled through on his side. She crawled for at least ten feet, until she ran into a wall. It was absolutely dark this far in. She felt with her hands until she found a small opening below her and to the right. Her hands were shaking and her breath came in harsh little gasps. She could hear no sound from Clay. There was no way she could turn around. How long would it take her to wriggle out backward? She twisted her body around to the side and crawled into the little invisible hole.

This passage was even tighter than the first. Icy water dripped onto the back of her neck. Spidery tree roots grabbed at her hair. Tears of despair started in her eyes as she worked her way down the steeply sloping crevice. Then suddenly the darkness expanded. She could lift her head; taste a draught of cold, moist, stale air. She felt carefully around, but could find no walls except the one behind her. "Clay?" she whispered.

"Over here." His voice came to her through the dark, strong, amused. A light flicked on and she could see him across the cavern, flashlight in hand, sitting in a niche halfway up the cave wall like an icon set in the wall of a church.

The cave wasn't as large as it had felt. Perhaps a hundred people could fit inside. She began to pick her way toward him across jumbled rocks. "Why are we here?"

He smiled at her, that beatific smile that had caught her eye last spring when she'd first seen him fishing on the beach at Makena. "This is where I'll come when my life is at an end."

"Clay, stop it." She halted halfway across the cave floor.

Clay said: "I think ninety-nine years is enough for any man. I should be

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able to make it to ninety-nine, don't you think? Baring any major accident."

"You could easily make it to a hundred and fifteen before old age takes you."

"Could be. But ninety-nine is enough." His eyes gleamed with a fey light. "I like it here, don't you?"

She looked around. The cave was an old lava tube that looked as if it had suffered in an earthquake. The walls were broken and crumbling. White calcite crystals showed here and there in snowy patches on the roof, otherwise the rock was unspectacular. She saw no carvings. Neither were there bones or other obvious sign of prehistoric burials. She shrugged and crossed her arms over her chest. "I've heard there are interesting insects to be found in caves like this."

He laughed, as bright and cheerful now as if he'd taken the sun inside him. "And they'll have me in the end."

"When you are ninety-nine." She could feel a nascent purpose building in the air, and resolved to wait quietly for its appearance.

"Yes," Clay said. "It'll only be a few years from your point of view. I hear the clocks will run very slowly aboardship when *Dragon* makes her run between the stars. I want you to think of me."

"I will do that."

"You'll probably be the last one alive to remember me."

"I feel the obligation. I'll remember you well."

His eyes were glittering in the flashlight's illumination. "I'll squeeze out all the time I can. I'll wait until the last day of my ninety-ninth year, the day before I'm one hundred. Then I'll come to this cave, and I'll sit right here in the dark until I die. Think of me: a naked old man on a shelf."

"You'll be too fat to fit through the entrance."

He gave her a nasty look. "You don't get it, do you, Asha? This cavern is a special place. No one ever saw it before me. You're only the second human being to come here. Doesn't that interest you? Isn't it important? Why are you leaving on *Dragon* except to see things no one has ever seen before? Well, here. I've fulfilled your wish and you didn't even have to leave Earth. What do you think?"

She squatted down slowly on the cave floor, cold seeping into her body through the soles of her boots. Her gaze swept the black walls once again. "It's just a cave, Clay."

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To her surprise, he nodded, satisfaction rolling like a wave across his face. "That's right. And even if it were halfway across the Universe, it would still be just a cave. It has no soul. No one's ever lived here. No one's ever died here. Nothing's ever happened here at all. Who cares?"

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"That you have to *live* in a place to imbue it with soul. Someday my grandmother will die. But she won't be gone from my life. I'll know her in the trees that she planted as a young woman, in the paintings that hang in our house, in the songs that I sing that I first heard from her lips." His eyes grew distant. "Everything on our farm has been touched or shaped by someone who loves me. By someone in my family. Even if they never knew me. Even if they died a hundred years before I was born, their love still fills my home. They knew I'd live here someday."

His gaze shifted back to Asha. "You'll never know the satisfaction my grandmother enjoys. You'll spend yourself searching for mysteries, but you won't find them. In the end, everything out there will be mundane, as secular and uninteresting as this cave. The only real mysteries are those of the human heart."

Was that true? Was it? She couldn't deny it outright. She'd seen the grandeur of nature and of human things. Palaces in the sky and mountains upon the Earth. Vast oceans, solar sails. And she'd known wonder and awe and joy at her surrounds — but never in absolute quantity. Always, under the surface, doubt whispered and made her uneasy. The beauty of the grandest vista, the perfection of the tiniest insect — what did it mean? In the end, she'd turn away, dissatisfied. The only experience she'd ever had that left her fully easy and content was her sexual relations with Clay.

The notion of being driven by biology didn't offend her. But could Clay be right? Was the human mind so constructed that it could not be satisfied except by something as simple and commonplace as love? "There's more," she said. "I know it. I want to see other places, Clay. It's the way I am." She gazed up at him. He still sat in his niche, one knee drawn up to his chin, the other leg dangling. He watched her — critically — as a director might watch a play. She took a step toward him. Then another. "And I will not stay here to watch you grow old!"

He pulled his leg up and looked at her sharply. A new excitement glinted in his eyes. "Let's gamble our love," he said.

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"What do you mean?"

"Let's make a bet on it. I want to stay. You want to go. We can't settle this rationally, so let's give it to chance. Do you think you could find your way out of here in the dark?"

She scowled. "Sure. It's just a simple chamber, and — " She looked around. Where was the entrance hole? She couldn't see it. Suddenly, she was unsure of the exact direction.

But Clay overlooked her distress. "Good," he said. "Then we're on." He hefted the flashlight and threw it across the chamber. It shattered against the wall and the light went out. His voice came out of the darkness, proud, challenging. "You lead us out of here, and I'll leave with you."

Her mouth was suddenly dry. "You'll take the Cure? You'll leave this place?"

"I'll do that." His voice had gone hoarse. "For you. For you."

He'd given up! Given in. Her heart pounded in an adrenaline rush of joy as she turned back the way she'd come. But...*which* way? False colors danced before her eyes as her brain drew hallucinations to populate the darkness. Which way had she come? "What if we can't find the way out?" she asked.

A bitter laugh greeted her question. "Then obviously: you stay here on the shelf with me."

"That's not funny, Clay."

"It isn't meant to be."

So perhaps he hadn't given in quite yet. "You think you'll keep me in here just long enough to miss my passage, right? That's the game you're playing."

"Is it a bet?"

She chuckled. She wasn't afraid of the dark. And she wasn't afraid of losing either. "You're on." She heard him climbing down from his niche. She imagined his body, lean and strong in the dark. Imagined his hands, from out of nowhere, clasping her. She giggled. This could be fun.

Suddenly there was a clatter of rockfall. Clay grunted and cursed. "*Ow!* What the — ?"

"What happened? Are you all right?"

"Something bit me." He sounded as if he were speaking through gritted teeth. "On my shoulder. *Uh* — ! Dammit!" She heard him slapping at the wall. "Sucker got me twice."

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"Clay, what is it?"

"I don't know! Something.... Shit. Adder...." His voice lurched toward her. Suddenly he fell against her, and they both went down. A rock dug into her side, and she winced in pain. "Aw man," Clay moaned. "My shoulder's going numb already — "

"Clay, if this is a joke — !"

Then she felt his shoulder and the line of his neck. They were already swollen.

THE PARAMEDIC completed her examination of Clay while her equipment was still being ported into the cave. She rocked back on her heels, to meet Asha's gaze. "There's nothing we can do," she said. "I'm sorry. If we'd been on the scene when it happened...." She shrugged helplessly. "But he's gone."

Asha nodded. The snake's neurotoxins had stopped Clay's heart long before she'd found her way out of the cave. It had taken her nearly three hours to discover that the cave entrance lay under a shelf that appeared to be part of the cave floor. Nearly three hours. In other circumstances, that wouldn't have been so long. In retrospect, the task Clay set her had been easy. *Lead us out of here, and I'll leave with you.*

"You'll still do that," she promised, kissing gently his cold lips. Then she looked up at the paramedic. "I want to take him out of here now."

It required another hour to bring the body out of the narrow cave entrance and up the side of the gully. Clay's grandmother stood on the edge of the slope, watching the progress of the gurney, her wringing hands the only sign of the distress she must be enduring. Where would her love go now? Asha stood behind her, listening to the soft beat of an approaching helicopter. A police officer had tagged a landing zone between the orchard and the wood. She watched him as he waved the ship in. "I'm Clay's wife now," she said to Electra's back. "Officially, that makes me next-of-kin."

Electra didn't respond, but Asha could sense the bitterness of her thoughts. *Thief!*

"I'm taking Clay for the Cure," Asha said.

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For a moment Electra continued unmoved. Then a shudder ran through her body, as if Asha had reached out and physically shaken her. "They told me he was dead," she whispered. She looked over her shoulder. For the first time in that terrible afternoon she met Asha's gaze. "They told me he was *dead.*"

Asha had never shared Clay's fondness for this domineering old woman. How could she, when circumstance had pitted them against each other from the start? Yet they'd both loved Clay. She was acutely conscious of that as the gurney bearing Clay's white-wrapped body was lifted over the lip of the ravine. "Yes," she explained softly. "By the standards of the unCured, Clay is dead." She stepped aside to let the body pass. "But his pattern remains. The structure of the cells within his brain is still apparent. It'll be no great challenge for the technicians of the Celestial Cities to restore him." She tore her gaze away from the body as it was being loaded on the helicopter. Her gaze fixed on Electra. "But when he's restored he'll also be Cured. His life here is over."

Yes, she was stealing him away, *like a thief....*

A medic leaned out of the helicopter to look at her. "You the wife?" he shouted over the beat of the rotors. "You want to ride along while we put him in cold storage? Then come on!"

She started forward. But guilt stung her conscience, slowing her. She was leaving Electra with nothing, not a grave to visit, or a presence to be half-sensed from the corner of the eye. She looked back. "Clay was ready to go!" she blurted. "He just couldn't bring himself to make the decision."

Electra's chin rose. "That's what you've never understood: the decision wasn't his to make." Her tired face seemed suddenly flushed with pride. "He belonged to the land. The land looked into his heart...and *let him* go."

Asha's lips parted in astonishment. A half-sensed truth rang inside her like a bell note on the edge of hearing. *"The land?"*

The medic leaned out of the helicopter again. "Come on, ma'am. Let's go!"

His shout jarred her from her reverie, shattering a vision that suddenly seemed lost to all recollection. "Coming!" she called, and ran

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hard for the helicopter. Electra shouted something after her. She caught the words as she scrambled into the cabin:

"A tree may be cut down for wood to make a ship, but it will always bear the grain of its youth!"

"Wouldn't have it any other way," Asha cried. She waved fiercely as the helicopter began to lift. In the beat of the rotors she could hear the sound of drums, in the purr of the engine, the throaty roar of a lion.

"Ahh! I think we've finally got a line on what's causing your shortness of breath."

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Ray Vukcevich has become a word-of-mouth sensation in the science fiction field. His short fiction, known for its distinctive style, has appeared in Pulphouse, Aboriginal SF, *and* Asimov's. *Ray has become an* F&SF *regular. His most recent appearance in our pages was "Giant Step" in our October/November 1994 issue. His short story, "Mom's Little Friends," received critical acclaim when it was reprinted in* The Best From Fantasy & Science Fiction *(St. Martin's Press).*

In "The Finger," Ray turns his attention to Robert Bly, the men's movement, and Iron John.

The Finger

By Ray Vukcevich

BOBBY WANTED TO PRACtice it on his mother, but he knew her face would turn red, then purple, and he'd see all the veins pulsing in her head. Smoke would pour from her ears and nose. Her eyes would pinwheel, and sparks would fly. Her lips would disappear in a tight mean line. She'd start vibrating and humming, and the top of her head would blow off like the lid of a steam kettle, and everything inside would run down her face, melting her until there'd be nothing left but a puddle of Mom stuff. So Bobby told her he was going out, instead.

He let the rusty spring on the screen door have its way as he ran from the kitchen into the Arizona sunshine and summer bug noise, and he was almost out of sight when he heard the satisfying bang! that made all the peacocks scream.

Bobby lazed on down the street, Main Street, the only street, a dirt road really, kicking rocks and looking for devils' horns. Swarms of summertime flies buzzed around his head. He pulled at his jeans and the shorts riding up

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in the crack of his butt. He kept an eye out for whirlwinds to stand in as he practiced flipping birds, the middle finger of his right hand snicking out like the blade of a switchblade knife.

Do it once, then do it twice, then do it again. This was a necessary man type skill his cousin fat Edward, who was thirteen and should know, had told him. Necessary for a gee man, Bobby thought (but never said) because that's what he was going to be — a gee man and maybe get himself a good golly molly. Twist and shout! Yes. He flipped off the sky.

And the sky said, "Hey!"

Bobby tipped his head back to see a man in a cage. The cage hung from a high branch of the biggest oak tree around. Jail tree. Everyone called the prisoner Robert; everyone knew he liked to drink whiskey and pinch the bottoms of bar girls. Bobby flipped him off.

Robert held the bars of the cage with both hands and glared down at Bobby. "Don't do that, Bobby B."

"That's not my name," Bobby said and held up his fist and triggered his finger again. Just when his middle finger snapped into position, he jabbed at Robert with his whole hand — a nice bit of style, Bobby thought.

"I told you not to do that!" Robert yelled. He pumped his legs and the cage swung on its rope. Bobby showed him his bird again.

Robert had gotten the cage going around in a circle, and now he crashed it against the trunk of the oak tree. "You just wait till I get out of here!"

Bobby flipped him off again, and then as Robert slumped to the floor of the cage and broke into tears, Bobby ran off down Main Street.

What was it about this gesture, he wondered, that it could make a grown man cry? Such power and magic. It was like when he'd called his cousin Edward a cocksucker, a term he'd gotten from Edward in the first place. Edward had chased him around and around the barn yelling that he'd kill him if he ever got his hands around Bobby's pussy neck. Cats and chickens. It didn't make a lot of sense. There was something potent and dirty about sucking on roosters, but Bobby couldn't figure what it could be. Cock Robin. Or maybe something to do with devil worship; he'd heard they liked to kill things and drink blood, or maybe geeks, the way Edward said they liked to bite the heads off chickens and suck the eggs up through the bleeding top. But wouldn't that make it hensucking?

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Bobby discovered a new refinement. As the middle finger of his right hand snicked out, he slapped the whole hand into his left palm, making a sharp smack that scared birds from the rooftops and set a snake to rattling right there in the middle of the road in front of him.

Coiled, pastel pink and blue and orange and green, the duckbill rattlesnake snarled, showing its daffy little needlesharp teeth. It swept its head left and right keeping its bright eyes on Bobby. The snake's dry rattle was so fast Bobby couldn't see the tail move. He stopped in his tracks and flipped off the snake.

The snake froze like it couldn't believe its eyes, then picked up its rattle twice as fast and hard as before. It hissed and spit at Bobby, who jumped to the side and jabbed his middle finger into the air, yelled "Yii!" then jumped again. The snake twisted around to follow Bobby, who kept moving and yelling and flipping it off. Just as Bobby thought he'd finally gotten the snake to knot itself, a car came barreling out of nowhere and honking its horn like crazy. Bobby jumped out of the way, and the car ran over the snake. Squashed it flat.

"No fair!" Bobby yelled, and when old Mr. Klein poked his head out of the side window to look back and shake his fist at Bobby, Bobby flipped a bird at him.

Mr. Klein braked hard, and the car skidded sideways and crashed into the Bait and Tackle Shop. Bobby hurried on down Main Street.

Mrs. Stokes stood hugging a brown paper bag on the steps of the Grocery Store. "Don't slouch so, Bobby," she said.

Bobby flipped her off.

Mrs. Stokes collapsed like she'd suddenly been unplugged.

Bobby jerked around like a gun fighter and flipped off the Dime Store, and the store exploded, spewing up electric trains and stuffed animals, comic books and pieces of plastic airplane models.

Bobby flipped off the Bright White Church on the corner, and it jumped into the air then fell onto its side with a splintering crash and the sounds of breaking glass. Flipping fast and furious now, Bobby turned the Little Red Schoolhouse into a big pile of little red bricks.

Bobby flipped off the Court House, and smoke filled its windows. The mayor ran out screaming, "Fire! Fire!"

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Downtown was beginning to look war-torn, worse for wear, maybe tornado-struck.

"You're not being very nice, Bobby," said the West Witch, ugly as sin his father called her, where she sat on the boardwalk with her plastic bag of empty vegetable cans and bits of bright yarn and corked bottles of powders and potions. Bobby flipped her off.

The witch's eyes got big, then she grinned, and Bobby could see she had no teeth. "Maybe you just need something sweet to suck on. A sweet tooth. Or two." She wiggled her eyebrows up and down at him, and sweetness filled his mouth. Chocolate. He backed away, sucking at his teeth. His front teeth. His chocolate teeth, and they were getting smaller fast, dissolving.

The witch sat rocking and slapping her knees and laughing at him, and when he zapped her with the finger again, all he was able to do was knock off her ragged bonnet, and that just seemed to make her laugh harder.

Bobby swallowed the last of his chocolate and ran on down the street, tonguing the space where his top front teeth had been. He stopped in front of the still standing Hardware Store where he knew there was a mirror in the window. He was so much older now, growing up before his very eyes. He watched in dismay as his new teeth came in. He was a chipmunk. How could he be a gee man if he looked like a big chipmunk? No, a beaver. Bobby the Beaver. There was something about beavers, too, something that put a sly smile on Edward's face. He'd never figure it out in time. You're always a day late and a dollar short, his father liked to say. Bobby flipped off the Hardware Store, reducing it to piles of lumber and nails, tools and electrical parts, pipes and toilet fixtures.

He let his shoulders slump, deliberate bad posture, and slouched on down the smoky street, getting bigger, stumbling into adolescence, feeling mean and shooting I-Meant-To-Do-That! glances around whenever he tripped over his own feet, kicking the town's rubble out of his way, taking time to flip off the county deputy and send his car tumbling with the tumble weeds. Stinking black leather jacket and dirty jeans, torn basketball shoes, flattop, a cool fool, coming up on Molly, the East Witch, as beautiful as the other one was ugly, saying, hey baby. The once-over for this one in her tight purple skirt and lacy white deep-vee blouse, brown and white shoes and bobby sox. Once-over was not enough, so the twice-over. Her dog, a blond lab, sat by her side

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giving Bobby the eye, an Elvis sneer on its lips, and a little rumbling growl coming from somewhere deep inside.

"Keep your eyes to yourself, Bobby B," Molly said.

So what could he do but flip her off?

She narrowed her eyes, said, "All right for you, Bobby. You asked for it." She raised an eyebrow.

What was it, he wondered, with these women and their eyebrows? Something pulled his eyes closed, and when he touched his face, he discovered that his eyelashes had grown long and heavy, so long, in fact, that they fell to his chest. He had to take a handful of eyelashes in each hand and pull them up and away from his eyes before he could see Molly standing there smirking with one hand on a cocked hip and a cigarette in the other. She blew a smoky kiss his way.

"I don't suppose you'd let me shine my gee man flashlight in your face?" Bobby asked.

"JC doesn't like that kind of talk, Bobby." She put her hand on the dog's head.

"You named your dog after Jesus Christ?"

"No. After Joseph Campbell."

Like that was his cue, the dog jumped up, circled around young Bobby B, and bit him in the seat of the pants.

Bobby dropped his eyelashes, but he could still see the sudden light. Teen epiphany. He was seized by a sudden need to rip off his clothes, run into the woods, and beat on a drum until his father came down out of the trees.

He turned and shouldered his way through the ragged refugees toward the end of Main Street and the wilderness beyond.

Just outside the remains of town, Edward jumped up from behind a big Ocotillo and flipped Bobby off with both hands while doing a shimmy like he had a tail to wag. "Take that, beaver face!" he shouted.

"Same to you!" Bobby grinned and flipped Edward off so hard his cousin's ears were pinned back.

"All right!" Edward slugged Bobby in the shoulder, and the two of them walked on, and as they walked, guys popped up from behind cacti to take potshots with that one finger salute. Snick. Snick. Like a running gun battle, but Bobby and Edward were too fast, and the vanquished soon fell in behind

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them, and by the time the sun had set, a Society of Men had formed.

They built a fire. They killed and cooked some rabbits. The moon soon gave them the cold shoulder. Coyotes sang. Backslapping, spitting, and farting, the men squatted with their drums in a circle around Bobby, who would soon exclaim sweet gee manly poetry.

WONDER WOMAN:
THE CONTEMPLATIVE YEARS
I wonder if I should go back to school.
I wonder if I should continue to fight crime.
I wonder why I never see any baby pigeons on the street...
J. HARRIS

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Jeff Bredenberg's first appearance in F&SF *("Imagine a Large-Breasted Woman," February, 1994) proved to be one of our more talked about stories of the year. "Shootin' Babies" should fall into the same category.*

The origin of "Shootin' Babies" came from a discussion Jeff had with his colleagues at the Wilmington, Delaware, News Journal. *"We were discussing how important it is to be consistent in your service to customers," he writes. "Customers should not have to wonder why their newspaper arrives at home at 6 AM one day and 8 AM the next. So I began to wonder — what if our common appliances operated like that!*

"And about babies: My boy Adam is four years old and I love him dearly. I've never even entertained the thought of hurting him and I do not own guns."

Shootin' Babies

By Jeff Bredenberg

WHEN I ARRIVED AT GATOR'S house to help with the stove, he was just shooting my baby son in the forehead. I set the brake on my tracker and stepped out onto the leafy gravel. Gator kicked the corpse, which was wriggling there on the lake bank.

"Yup, it's yours all right," he shouted up the hill, clearly displeased with me. "Look at the eyes — and the spread of the forehead, how the eyebrows are formed? Looks like your boy Matthew five years ago."

I told my boy Matthew to stay in the back compartment of the tracker, and I hopped down a dozen railroad ties that had been set into the hillside. I tried not to trounce the wildflowers and herbs in the stair-step planting beds.

It was hard to say at first glance — that distracting bullet hole an inch above the bridge of the nose, the flesh already starting to crack and ooze a sickly green. But Gator was right. Okay, it wasn't literally my *son.* But this rapidly disintegrating form had the classic Stohler blond-haired, blue-eyed baby features.

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Gator worked unnecessarily at the bill of his Chicago Cubs hat, wrenching his white locks back and forth. "You was here overnight two weeks ago when I moved in. I tolt you and tolt you again not to go near the lake. *Especially* not to put anything into it. *Particularly* nothing with a DNA pattern to it. What'd you do? March straight to the end of the dock and flog yer dolphin?"

I could feel my face glowing red. "No. Didn't go anywhere near the lake. You know I'm wary of chemical reservoirs."

And then, with my denial so flatly stated, I paused to think about it. *Had* I gone near the lake? Five of us from the office had spent the day moving Gator into his new retirement home. Hauling boxes, heaving furniture. We'd only destroyed a lamp and a vase. Couldn't have been much else. At sundown, Gator had hauled out two frosty cases of Bass ale.

"Ah," I said. "I do remember something about stumbling out and taking a leak on the compost pile."

The compost bins were a neat arrangement of two-by-fours and hardware cloth. They had been left behind by the previous owner of the cottage. Two of the bins were half full of rotting muck.

Gator snorted. "They's five feet from the water's edge, an' you go pissin' in the compost. Piss could easily seep five feet."

"Sounded like a good idea at the time — help the decomposition along. You think urine carries your DNA?"

Gator shook his head, amazed that I'd had to ask.

"I'd hate to lose the house," Gator said. "Lease contract was pretty specific that the lake was purely an 'aesthetic asset.' Thass what they called it. Even made me buy an air-seal bubble top for my pontoon boat. The utility could prolly void the lease now if it wanted. They don't like letting their imaging compound get all depleted like this — just 'cause some ale-belly couldn't find the bathroom."

"Hold on," I said. "The road atlas that my tracker subscribes to says this lake's only a two-three security level, like you could go skiing on it or something."

"Two-point-three may be the *government* rating, yeah, but the *utility* what owns it says not to go near it, and there ain't one of my neighbors who doesn't have that written into his lease."

"Sounds like a lot of trouble, this lake."

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"On the programmer's salary *we* made," Gator said, "I imagine you're gonna get a house on a lake of pure *water*! The kind you can go skinny-dipping in — trolling for snapping turtles. Hah."

The baby corpse had now degenerated into a green puddle of slime oozing back toward the lake.

"Reason you called was you wanted me to check out your stove," I reminded Gator. I hoped to divert his attention away from this embarrassing business — the lake borrowing my DNA pattern and belch forth little replicas. Imaging compounds are pretty volatile like that.

Gator peered into the lake. He edged farther down the bank, his boots tearing at the grass, until he came to rest atop the rim of the non-porous concrete that covered the lake bottom.

"There," he said, pointing with his 9mm automatic, "there's another one comin'. They don't develop on any schedule I can figure, but they average about two an hour. I pick 'em off quick as I can — those chemicals they drag around, they're hell on the grass and shrubbery."

A pink dome the size of a grapefruit was rising through the murk of the lake, another little Stohler monster coming to meet Papa.

Gator fired, and the little dome cracked open before it even broke the surface.

"Don't feel bad," Gator said. "They aren't human. Aren't even animal. Just some mindless biochem. . . perversion. This is one of them compounds that the imaging utilities gotta keep in such big supply."

"How long will this go on?" It was a cool day, but I was beginning to sweat.

Gator shrugged. "Could be days, even a week. Maybe just until some other DNA comes along. Whatever — I bought several cases of ammo today."

I got Matthew out of the tracker and took him inside by the roadside door, avoiding the lakefront. It would take me a while to formulate an explanation for the gunplay.

Inside, Matthew's blue eyes shot open at the sight of Gator's television set. The little guy could quote the specs of any of the latest sim/stim enhancements, and Gator's new rig had all the bells and whistles. A strip of chrome molding was emblazoned with the motto "You can't do *that* with electricity!" — the rallying cry of the photonic industry.

Without even asking, Matthew was punching at the startup keypad and

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then rolling through the channel grid until he found a ce*zanne* concert on the West Coast.

The pod's ferroplex door popped open. From my viewpoint the holovids were a little fuzzy and distorted. But Matthew's arms fell to his side and gyrated in small circles, the way they do when he's in the thrall of his favorite photonic devices. He flashed his wide eyes in my direction, as if he were simultaneously asking and receiving permission to go ahead, and then he climbed inside and eagerly settled into the seat.

As I pushed the door closed around him, the holos inside came into appropriate focus — an amphitheater of ce*zanne* enthusiasts bobbing their heads and waggling their feet to those incomprehensible rhythms that the devotees find hypnotizing.

"See ya in an hour or two, Matthew," I said, and I pressed the door until the latch clicked.

Gator was up on the kitchen landing fiddling with the stove, knowing I would want to inspect it right away.

"The delivery men set that TV up for me," he said. "I hain't even gotten around to reading the manual yet, and Matthew there seems to know it the way he knows his own pud. You're such a cook, maybe you know stoves like Matthew knows TVs?"

"I told you on the phone," I said, "that I'm no expert with kitchen appliances. No guarantees, okay?"

"Much time as you spend in kitchens," he huffed, "ya ought ta know something about 'em. This is my first PIXI, ya know. Elma and me, we always had a pure *elec*tronic kitchen — much as we could still find parts for. Guess I'd always had it in mind that I'd be dead before electronic appliances were totally phased out. Humph."

Like the new television, this PIXI stove was the latest. The previous resident apparently had stripped the house of his precious, familiar appliances, leaving Gator to refurnish it via a broker over long distance. Gator had been too distracted with the move — and, typically, too impatient — to get very specific with the broker. As a result he had wound up with the most expensive in everything.

The top of the stove had that unsettling, undulating finish that was characteristic of many PIXI devices. It was aqua-green, looking like a square slice of a miniature Atlantic Ocean. On the selector panel the cook could

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punch up the specifications of the burner he wanted, and the Photonic Imaging Xenon Interface would instantly assemble that burner in the requested size, shape, and temperature.

Gator shuffled up behind me and we stared at the selector panel.

"Looks pretty standard to me, Gator."

"Ta me, looks like the control board for a lunar shuttle," he replied.

I punched up the specs for a routine burner — round, six inches across, 500 degrees F. The glowing disc materialized in the center of the stovetop. An illuminated rocker switch allowed temperature adjustments.

"Humph," Gator said.

I went to the refrigerator and found a couple of boned chicken breasts, then opened the pantry and selected two ripe tomatoes. Then back to the refrigerator for a bottle of ale, which I opened.

"What are ya doin'?" Gator asked.

There was a suitable skillet hanging on a peg by the kitchen window, and I drew a butcher knife out of the storage block.

"I need garlic," I said, "fresh if you have it. And let me see — was that basil I saw growing in one of those little garden beds outside?"

"I don't get it," Gator said, removing his Cubs hat.

"There's not much to get. The stove's working fine, and I'm gonna make dinner."

Gator went outside to snip some basil and shoot a couple of babies that were chewing on the lawn furniture.

I AWOKE AT first light the next morning. Geese were honking in the distance. They would not be settling on the lake, however. No fowl would last long paddling around a lake that was hungry for DNA, even if it got through the laser fencing that domed the reservoir. Geese learn these things quickly.

Matthew rolled over in his cot and drew the corner of his quilt up over his head against the chill. He usually slept long and hard after such an extensive session with the holovids.

I tiptoed out of the bedroom and up to the kitchen level. I glanced down through the front windows into the yard, just to satisfy my curiosity. I had imagined that a full herd of babies might have groped its way onto the lawn during the night, but Gator had assured me that they only materialize during

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daylight. Something to do with photosynthesis.

I poured beans into the espresso machine, which growled and dribbled its thick fluid into a cup.

I snapped the seals on a few eggs, dashed some milk into the bowl, and whipped them together with a fork. Chopped a couple scallions, diced some Swiss cheese. Peeled several strips of bacon out of the vacuum bin.

Then I got the skillet down again and took it and the bowl over to the gleaming new stove. I hit the "repeat" button to produce the same burner configuration that had been last requested. No response.

Damn.

I poked in the specs again: round, six inches, 500 degrees F. No response.

I asked for a five-inch burner. Nothing.

I ordered a nine-inch burner. Nope.

Then, just because I was steamed, I poked in specs for a thirty-six-inch burner — which dutifully materialized, every square centimeter of it at precisely 500 degrees. Suddenly the kitchen was a sauna.

I poked the "off" button, and the colossal burner vanished.

I turned on the vidphone and scrolled down to the number for PIXICO. A stern-looking woman appeared on the screen. She had what appeared to be a greasy chicken bone entwined in her hair. (Is this some rural fashion, I wondered, or is this just so with-it that I hadn't yet heard of it?)

"The offices of the Photonic Imaging Xenon Interface Company are currently closed," the woman intoned. A recording. "Saturday hours are eleven a.m. to four p.m."

I poured the beaten eggs back into their original shells, milk and all, and snapped them closed — they would keep for a few hours that way in the refrigerator.

The espresso was done, so I poured a cup and tapped a few grains of sugar into it.

Matthew was stirring downstairs and Gator was down the hall now, breaking wind in the bathroom. Maybe I could make French toast in the oven, I thought, or maybe we should just eat cereal.

I went out onto the deck, the warm cup cradled in my hands. The air had that autumn bite to it. I slouched into a rail-side sling and watched the water, trying not to fixate on the lake's edge where, I supposed, the bio-chem babies would begin emerging again soon.

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Gator padded out onto the fiberboard decking, naked but for a T-shirt. He jammed a fresh clip into his 9mm and rested his hands on the rail while he took aim at the bank. Without the Cubs cap, his hair was a wild snowstorm, thinner than I had remembered.

"You've lost yer Matthew, ya know," Gator said.

"Huh?" I said with a start. "What?"

It seemed like such a vile thing to hear from a man who was preparing to slaughter my simulated offspring.

"The TV," Gator said. "I just saw Matthew closing himself in again. Asked him if he didn't want breakfast. Looked at me like I was nuts."

"Just as well," I said, sipping at the espresso. "I'm, um, having trouble with the stove. The only burner it'll let me order up is the size of a satellite dish. Can't get a live human at PIXICO till eleven."

"So there *is* somethin' wrong with the stove."

I nodded.

"Thought you had all sorts of friends at the utility."

"I know one guy," I said, "a mid-level graphic artist at the Philadelphia office. I doubt he even knows who handles service out here."

"Ah," Gator replied, and he squeezed the trigger.

The surprise of the blast threw my hands up and the espresso sloshed into my lap.

"Damn!" I said.

"Damn!" said Gator, and he fired again.

On the crest of the lake bank a fleshy little figured collapsed from the impact of the second shot and rolled down the hill.

Gator stood erect again, satisfied. His penis had shrunk up in the cold, pushing the bottom of his T-shirt up into a tent shape. He read my distaste.

"You gotta loosen up, Stohler."

Matthew was still encased in the TV at eleven a.m. Through the ferroplex I glimpsed a holovid of an asteroid cowboy darting about in his shepherd pod. The show was probably a harmless enough space opera.

I poked at the dial pad on the holophone and got a picture of old Bone-Hair again.

"Photonic Imaging Xenon Interface," she said grimly. She awaited a reply. This, apparently, was a live image.

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From outside came the crack of Gator's 9mm.

"I'm at my friend's house," I said into the holophone, "having trouble with the stove."

Ms. Bone-Hair referred to the readout just above the phone camera. "You're on our North Twin Reservoir," she said. It sounded like an accusation.

"That's right. My friend Gator — um, Martin Brown is his real name — just moved in. Got a brand new PIXI stove, one of those high-end models. He couldn't make it work and figured I could — but I'm having trouble too."

"What exactly were you trying to achieve, Mr. — "

"Um, I just wanted a standard-size burner for an omelette."

Ms. Bone-Hair tapped her key pad and watched the read-out.

"And what time of day might that have been?" she asked.

"Just a couple hours ago," I said.

She snorted. "Saturday morning, eight, nine a.m.? Why, that's prime imaging time, sir. PIXICO's imaging reserves are bound to be rather strained at that time of day — doesn't it stand to reason? Particularly for stovetop burners."

"But it *allowed* me to call up a burner the size of a bath tub," I replied.

"Have you read your operator's manual, Mr. Brown?"

"Brown is my friend's name. It's his house."

"The larger burners are restaurant-gauge. The owner's manual would explain that they are produced by a different compound, one with a sturdier molecular structure. Of course, the imaging is more costly and that will show up on your bill. But the supply is usually less strained. If you must cook at peak hours, perhaps you should use the larger burner."

"Yeah," I said, "next time I want to peel the paint off the ceiling at the same time. Look, I use PIXI stoves all the time where I come from, and I've never heard of a low supply of imaging compound."

"And where would it be that you're from?"

"Philadelphia."

Gator shouldered in front of me — pretty rude from a holophone etiquette standpoint. "I'd just as soon have a stove installed like the old one," he said to Ms. Bone-Hair.

"But that would be an *electric* stove," she sniffed, her tone implying all of the dreadful qualities that electric appliances brought to the modern mind — energy waste, danger, inflexibility.

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"Thass right," Gator said, "an' it had four burners, always available."

"Well, in summation, gentlemen," said Bone-Hair, "I recommend that you avoid peak hours, read the owner's manual, and — *please* — remember that you are a hunnerd and twenty miles from Philadelphia. So, on to the next customer!" She smiled and the holo screen went blank.

My chrono said it was a little after eleven a.m. I poked at the control pad of the PIXI stove, and a common nine-inch burner materialized.

I shrugged and turned it off again.

Gator shrugged too. "*Avoid peak hours,*" he mimicked. "I wonder how that lady'd like a pistol up her butt? So hey, what are ya gonna do?"

"I guess I'm going to make an omelette."

"No," Gator said, "I mean about the stove."

"There's nothing wrong with the stove. What's wrong is that you've moved to a place that's a hundred twenty miles from Philadelphia. To the edge of a lake of imaging compound where the population density is, by law, almost nil — and the photonic utility is probably run by corn farmers."

Gator looked hurt. Or maybe he was just suddenly worried that his new cottage was not nearly the idyllic retirement hideaway that he had once thought.

"Sorry, Stohler," he mumbled. "Guess I was expecting too much. Guess I was remembering about how you used to talk — about knowing people who knew other people who knew how to bend the rules sometimes."

Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of a small figure down in the living room silhouetted against the picture window. Matthew. He appeared to have each palm, and his nose, pressed to the glass.

I went down the steps.

"Tired of holovision already?" I asked.

Matthew turned, and my heart leapt. Perhaps it was the harsh sunlight shadowing his face, but his eyes seemed to have receded into dark hollows. He seemed uncharacteristically tentative. He seemed gawd-awful sick.

"Daddy," he asked, "is there something wrong with the lake?"

Oh, damn. Gator had just been outside hunting babies, and maybe Matthew saw something that will scar him for life. Why doesn't he crawl back into the TV for a few more hours?

"No, Matthew," I told him calmly. "The lake's just fine. See? Isn't it a pretty lake?"

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"There aren't any geese," he said sternly.

"Ah. Geese. Well, that's storybook stuff, my man. In the storybooks you have geese paddling around on the water. But this isn't that kind of lake."

He looked pathetic — little Oshkosh overalls hanging limply around him. I figured I'd better get some food into him.

"But this lake," he squeaked, "for what it is, it's an okay lake then?"

"Definitely," I said, taking his hand and leading him toward the stairs to the kitchen. "Yes, definitely."

"Good," he said, "the pixies will be glad to hear it."

We arrived on the kitchen level. Gator was cleaning his pistol and reloading several of his seventeen-round clips.

"Pixies — like you've been talking to Tinkerbell?" I asked.

"Tinkerbell is for pussies, Dad," he said.

Gator raised one eyebrow into an arch that said, "Where'd a five-year-old learn that kind of language?"

And then I had an alarming thought, which begat more and more alarming thoughts.

"Matthew," I said slowly, "these people you've been talking to — did you call them *pixies* because they're from the utility? From PIXICO?"

Matthew blinked innocently. "No, Daddy, they're from the holovision."

"Gator," I said, "is your holovision interactive?"

Gator slapped a clip into place. "Tell ya the truth, I've barely had it on. Knowin' how to interact might come natural to Matthew. But I'm the one hasn't even figured the stove yet."

"The utility?" little Matthew asked, eyes widening with horror. "Will I have to pay a bill then?"

MATTHEW ATE half of an omelette and with very little resistance went to bed for what I hoped would be a long nap. Gator was getting fidgety.

"Calm down," I said. "You get in a shouting match with that Bone-Hair lady — threaten her or something — and you'll lose the house altogether. PIXICO will toss your ass out on County Road 814 — and your new stove and TV right after you."

"Well, they already suspect something's wrong with the lake, so what's wrong with a little photonic pissing match?" he asked. "*You're* the one

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oughta be tootin' steam out his ass! They were trying to use your *son*, dammit — a five-year-old — to check up on their fucking lake of imaging compound! This ain't a retirement house — it's a photonic prison!"

I rolled my eyes at the exaggeration and punched a number on the holophone. A crazy, animated sequence rose on the screen — a parade of tiny turkeys in little yellow rain hats emerging from a sleeping man's nostrils.

"This is Osborne, all right," I said.

Gator looked skeptical.

"Oh, I haven't called him in a while, but Osborne would create a greeting like this," I said.

When the turkeys were done with their dance, a large Navajo appeared on the screen. He was hunched forward to see his own holo screen, giving us a close-up of his stylishly ragged haircut. Behind him was a wall full of animation decks and editing monitors.

"Osborne!" I said. "How are things in the graphics department? Looks like PIXICO isn't giving you enough to do in Philadelphia."

Osborne snorted. "If I had known it was you calling, Stohler, I would have run out a different greeting. I have a new one called the Butt Brothers Ballet. Want to see it?"

"Love to, but I got no time," I said. "I need to run a problem past you." As I told him the story of Bone-Hair, the demon stove, and Matthew's encounter with pixie spies, Osborne's heavy face slowly collapsed into a scowl.

"This friend of yours — Gator?" Osborne asked. "This is the one you've been telling me about for years? The one that's got an instinct for fucking with people. And attracting people that wanna fuck with *him*."

"I just need some advice, Osborne."

He grunted. "Look, you've got this rural outfit out there. Technically, *legally*, it's a separate company — anti-trust laws, you know. But it's PIXICO-Philadelphia, PIXICO-Peoria, and on like that. The management styles of these little sideshows can get pretty wild. In Philly, ya know, we keep the imaging compounds in underground tanks. Those substances are too sensitive to have civilians crawling around them."

"Gator's here because of the scenery," I said. "And — hell — it *is* a beautiful view."

Osborne grunted again. When he stretched, his face rose out of sight. He hunched down again, looking weary.

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"Sounds like your cow-chippin' utility is running close to the bone on its budget," Osborne said. "Otherwise they wouldn't lease cottages on the banks of an imaging compound reservoir. And they wouldn't go gullybonkers over a small herd of slime-babies. That would be a relatively small drain on their imaging power, ya know, unless they have barely enough imaging reserves to service their customers — "

The holo image of Osborne collapsed into a roiling field of wild geometric shapes. A new image materialized — the familiar puritan countenance of Ms. Bone-Hair.

"I'm so sorry," she sniffed, "but transmissions contrary to the interests of PIXICO are strictly prohibited. You will find in paragraph thirty-two of the user contract that — "

The sharp *whack* of a pistol shot tossed my heart up into my throat. I turned to find Gator wearing a satisfied grin, lowering his automatic. The phone's holo screen was collapsing into a little mound of crystal junk.

"Got the snooping bitch," Gator said.

"What you got was your own holophone," I said.

Gator squinted. "I'm tired," he said, as if that explained it all.

The surface of the stove erupted into a fiery replica of Bone-Hair. About her head was a bouffant of wild blue flame. Her eyes were glowing coals. She swatted at me with searing white fingertips, singeing my shirt at the shoulder. With the other hand she snatched the 9mm out of Gator's hands.

I dodged, toppling a kitchen chair. Gator yelped and bolted for a closet.

Dangerous as she was, Bone-Hair seemed to be sunk waist-deep in the stovetop and stuck that way. Thank gawd for what limits there were to photonic imaging.

The kitchen curtains were turning brown. In a moment they would burst into flame. The countertops were blistering from the heat. Bone-Hair flailed maniacally, flinging melted gunmetal around the kitchen. She opened her mouth and rattled my ears with demented keening.

Gator emerged from the closet, his jaw set with determination. In fluid motions he hoisted an axe onto his shoulder and charged at the blazing specter that had taken over his kitchen. The axe sliced easily through the fire monster and glanced off the surface of the stove.

"To hell with *her*," I shouted. "Take a whack at the photonics! The control panel!"

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Gator hoisted the axe again. Bone-Hair effortlessly re-formed herself, swiped at his face, and etched four sickly brown welts across his jaw — one for each finger. Gator recoiled but recovered quickly. All of the silver hair on the right side of his head had been scorched away. The curtains whooshed into flame. Gator's axe arced through the air and struck the control panel. The ferroplex cracked, but Bone-Hair was unfazed.

The blazing creature clutched the axe blade with one paw and grabbed Gator's wrist with the other. Gator howled as the stench of burning flesh filled the kitchen.

I heaved a kitchen chair at Bone-Hair, but she swatted it aside as if it were no more than a dragonfly. Gator's hand fell to the stovetop with a sizzling splash, the wrist burned through. Bone-Hair opened her mouth into an inhuman gape and bit into his neck.

Gator's jaw opened silently, and his eyes rolled in my direction — a dead stare. The fire beast yanked Gator's torso up onto the stovetop, where it crackled like bacon.

Bone-Hair's fiery features died down suddenly, as if she were placated by death. She shrank to standard human proportions, although she still was implanted in the stovetop. Her blazing skin and hair faded to normal tones. She folded her hands demurely and regarded me — a dumbstruck guest in a burning kitchen, watching rivulets of Gator's sputtering blood pour down the side of the stove.

"Well," she said primly, "you can't do *that* with electricity!"

Even if I'd had something to say I would not have been capable. I backed away warily and found the stairs.

"I will have to file a report, you know," she said, oblivious to the gut-wrenching smoke that nearly concealed her image now. "It may be that you share some liability for damage to PIXICO property. May I have your name, please?"

On the lower level I found the television pod, and through the ferroplex I could see little Matthew's blond head. Oh, gawd. Bone-Hair had me by the balls. If she could project herself through something as rudimentary as a stovetop, she would be an indescribable terror inside a sophisticated interactive holo pod.

I strode across the room and yanked at the door. It came open easily and Matthew stared at me, eyes wide.

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"Come here, Matt," I said. "Right now."

"Are you mad at me, Daddy?"

"No," I said flatly. "But please come out of there right away. Um, we have to leave now."

Matthew shrugged, swiveled out of the seat, and stepped out onto the floor. I realized then that the holo screen surrounding him was blank. The entire pod interior seemed mute, lifeless.

"Why didn't you have it on, Matt?"

"I was just looking at the sentia deck," he said. "Gator said I couldn't watch TV anymore. Said those pixies weren't good."

"So you obeyed?"

"Gator said I couldn't watch anymore, and then he threw the override switches, unhooked the photonic feed, and locked the control panel." Matthew was not pleased.

I smiled. And the downstairs holophone unit hummed. I could smell smoke from the kitchen now.

I took Matthew's hand and tugged him toward the downstairs door.

"It's rude not to answer the phone," Matt said.

"Yeah," I said, "this is all pretty rude."

Down near the lake, two babies were butting their heads against the two-by-four framing of the compost bin. Trying to return to the womb, I imagined.

Matthew saw them, of course, and pointed.

"Just some of the local wildlife," I explained. "I'll tell you about it later." Later, I hoped, I would have made up a better story.

When I let Matthew into the back compartment of the Arisawa tracker he listlessly fired up the holo unit. It was a special installation, several notches above the factory rigs, but still a poor substitute for Gator's new machine.

I extended the outrigger on the tracker and noticed that smoke was starting to seep out from the frame of the kitchen window.

I reviewed the tracker's mapping unit and retraced the several twists and turns that had led me to Gator's hideaway among the cornfields of southeastern Pennsylvania. The first commercial structure we encountered bore the sign "Yoder's Trading Store," and I pulled into the gravel lot.

"Look, Matthew — an Amish store."

Matthew did not look up, absorbed as he was in a surreal swirl of

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pineapples and chartreuse amoebas. I popped the tracker door open, hoping to find something inside to drink during the drive home.

The other three vehicles outside the store were obviously Amish — patched together relics from the era of the internal combustion engine. The Amish sect in this vicinity, anyway, allowed its members to embrace several castoff technologies — among them gasoline-powered autos and electricity. The next county over, who knows? The Amish there could still be in the horse-and-buggy days.

I had parked beside an odd truck that seemed to have been cobbled together from several different models. The body was a checkerboard of blue and green, layered over with mud and rust. It had once had a flat bed, but now a wooden frame held dozens of chickens in stacked cages on each side of the truck. The interior of the truck bed housed a small herd of pigs. The truck reeked of fresh manure.

Forgetting about my thirst, I returned to the driver's seat. About fifty yards down the road, I found a dirt turn-off and parked there.

"I need you to stay here by yourself for just a few minutes," I said to Matthew.

He looked up from the back compartment and for a fraction of a second our eyes locked and he nodded. Sometimes that's all the acknowledgment I can hope for.

I closed the door and took a few steps in the direction of Yoder's before I changed my mind. I yanked the door open again, reached into the back, and dragged Matthew out by the back of his collar.

The little guy glared at me, a mixture of irritation and astonishment.

"Daaaaad!"

"Sorry, Matthew. I'm, learning to loosen up."

"Well, ya aren't too good at it yet."

I stole the chicken-and-pig truck, an impetuous gesture that Gator would have appreciated. This was done not without guilt, of course — I was quite sorry to be depriving an honest farmer of livestock.

"This is criminal, Dad," Matthew reminded me, bouncing on the passenger seat.

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"A greater good is being done, though," I said lamely. The greater good, I told myself, was revenge.

The steering wheel was insanely loose. I had to spin it at least two revolutions to turn in any direction, which caused me to flatten dozens of stalks of corn by the road. The livestock reacted with a long chorus of snorking and squawking, apparently not used to bouncing across ditches at high speeds. Matthew quickly figured out how to fasten the old-time shoulder harness.

By the time we reached Gator's place the flames had broken through the roof. A cone of black smoke spread into the sky, and damn if I didn't hear a siren far away.

Matthew could do nothing but pump his little legs and point at the flames: "Dad! Dad!"

I eased the truck down the hill into Gator's lakeside yard. There were five slime babies scattered about the yard now, two of them rolling around in the basil beds. At the sight of them, Matthew's voice rose into an incomprehensible squeal.

I stopped at the lake's edge, got out of the cab, and pulled Matthew out of the passenger door. I released the parking brake. The patchwork truck lumbered into the dark lake and sank quickly, taking its considerable cargo of animal DNA with it.

If slime babies could emerge from just a trace of urine, now the lakeside would be populated with slime chickens and slime swine for years to come. How much of a drain that would be on PIXICO's imaging capabilities was unknowable. But it was a nice symbolic parting shot. A 9mm parting shot.

"We really gotta get out of here, Dad."

"How 'bout I throw you in too?"

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Robert Reed is having a good year. His novel, Beyond the Veil of Stars *(Tor Books), has received excellent reviews (including one in* The New York Times Book Review*). He has just finished another novel,* An Exaltation of Larks, *and has sold us a few more short stories.*

"A Place with Shade" is an unusual science fiction story about a professional terraformer and the job that changes his life.

A Place with Shade

By Robert Reed

THE OLD MAN WAS CORPULent like a seal, muscle clothed in fat to guarantee warmth, his skin smooth and his general proportions — stocky limbs and a broad chest — implying a natural, almost unconscious power. He wore little despite the damp chill. The brown eyes seemed capable and shrewd. And humorless. We were standing on a graveled beach, staring at his tiny sea; and after a long silence, he informed me, "I don't approve of what you do, Mr. Locum. It's pretentious and wasteful, this business of building cruel places. You're not an artist, and I think it's healthy for both of us to know my objections to your presence here."

I showed a grin, then said, "Fine. I'll leave." I had spent three months inside cramped quarters, but I told him, "Your shuttle can take me back to the freighter. I'll ride out with the iron."

"You misunderstand, Mr. Locum." His name was Provo Lei, the wealthiest person for a light-month in any direction. "I have these objections, but you aren't here for me. You're a gift to my daughter. She and I have finally agreed

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that she needs a tutor, and you seem qualified. Shall we dispense with pretenses? You are a toy. This isn't what you would call a lush commission, and you'd prefer to be near a civilized world, building some vicious forest for society people who want prestige and novelty. Yet you need my money, don't you? You're neither a tutor nor a toy, but your debts outweigh your current value as an artist. Or am I wrong?"

I attempted another grin, then shrugged. "I can work on a larger scale here." I'm not someone who hesitates or feels insecure, but I did both just then. "I've had other offers — "

"None of substance," Provo interrupted.

I straightened my back, looking over him. We were in the middle of his house — a sealed hyperfiber tent covering ten thousand hectares of tundra and ice water — and beyond the tent walls was an entire world, earth-size but less massive. Not counting robots, the world's population was two. Counting me, three. As we stood there enjoying impolite conversation, an army of robots was beneath the deep water-ice crust, gnawing at rock, harvesting metals to be sold at a profit throughout the district.

"What do you think of my little home, Mr. Locum? Speaking as a professional terraformer, of course."

I blinked, hesitating again.

"Please. Be honest."

"It belongs to a miser." Provo didn't have propriety over bluntness. "This is cheap Arctic package. Low diversity, a rigorous durability, and almost no upkeep. I'm guessing, but it feels like the home of a man who prefers solitude. And since you've lived here for two hundred years, alone most of the time, I don't think that's too much of a guess."

He surprised me, halfway nodding.

"Your daughter's how old? Thirty?" I paused, then said, "Unless she's exactly like you, I would think that she would have left by now. She's not a child, and she must be curious about the rest of the Realm. Which makes me wonder if I'm an inducement of some kind. A bribe. Speaking as a person, not a terraformer, I think she must be frighteningly important to you. Am I correct?"

The brown eyes watched me, saying nothing.

I felt a brief remorse. "You asked for my opinion," I reminded him.

"Don't apologize. I want honesty." He rubbed his rounded chin, offering what could have been confused for a smile. "And you're right, I do bribe my

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daughter. In a sense. She's my responsibility, and why shouldn't I sacrifice for her happiness?"

"She wants to be a terraformer?"

"Of the artistic variety, yes."

I moved my feet, cold gravel crunching under my boots.

"But this 'cheap package,' as you so graciously described it, is a recent condition. Before this I maintained a mature Arctic steppe, dwarf mammoths here and a cold-water reef offshore. At no small expense, Mr. Locum, and I'm not a natural miser."

"It sounds like Beringa," I muttered.

"My home world, yes." Beringa was a giant snowball terraformed by commercial souls, carpeted with plastics and rock and rich artificial soils, its interior still frozen while billions lived above in a kind of perpetual summer, twenty-hour days but limited heat. The natives were built like Provo, tailored genes keeping them comfortably fat and perpetually warm. In essence, Beringa was an inspired apartment complex, lovely in every superficial way.

The kind of work I hated most, I was thinking.

"This environment," I heard, "is very much makeshift."

I gestured at the tundra. "What happened?"

"Ula thought I would enjoy a grove of hot-sap trees."

Grimacing, I said, "They wouldn't work at all." Ecologically speaking. Not to mention aesthetically.

"Regardless," said Provo, "I purchased vats of totipotent cells, at no small cost, and she insisted on genetically tailoring them. Making them into a new species."

"Easy enough," I whispered.

"And yet." He paused and sighed. "Yet some rather gruesome metabolites were produced. Released. Persistent and slow toxins that moved through the food web. My mammoths sickened and died, and since I rather enjoy mammoth meat, having been raised on little else — "

"You were poisoned," I gasped.

"Somewhat, yes. But I have recovered nicely." The nonsmile showed again, eyes pained. Bemused. "Of course she was scared for me and sorry. And of course I had to pay for an extensive cleanup, which brought on a total environmental failure. This tundra package was an easy replacement, and besides, it carries a warranty against similar troubles."

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Popular on toxic worlds, I recalled. Heavy metals and other terrors were shunted away from the human foods.

"You see? I'm not a simple miser."

"It shouldn't have happened," I offered.

Provo merely shrugged his broad shoulders, admitting, "I do love my daughter. And you're correct about some things. But the situation here, like anywhere, is much more complicated than the casual observer can perceive."

I looked at the drab hyperfiber sky — the illusion of heavy clouds over a waxy low sun — and I gave a quick appreciative nod.

"The area around us is littered with even less successful projects," Provo warned me.

I said, "Sad."

The old man agreed. "Yet I adore her. I want no ill to befall her, and I mean that as an unveiled warning. Ula has never existed with ordinary people. My hope is that I live long enough to see her mature, to become happy and normal, and perhaps gain some skills as a terraformer too. You are my best hope of the moment. Like it or not, that's why I hired you."

I stared out at his little sea. A lone gull was circling, bleating out complaints about the changeless food.

"My daughter will become infatuated with you," I heard. "Which might be a good thing. Provided you can resist temptation, infatuation will keep her from being disillusioned. Never, never let her become disillusioned."

"No?"

"Ula's not her father. Too much honesty is a bad thing."

I felt a momentary, inadequate sense of fear.

"Help her build one workable living place. Nothing fancy, and please, nothing too inspired." He knelt and picked up a rounded stone. "She has an extensive lab and stocks of totipotent cells. You'll need nothing. And I'll pay you in full, for your time and your imaginary expertise."

I found myself cold for many reasons, staring skyward. "I've been to Beringa," I told Provo. "It's ridiculously cheery. Giant flowers and giant butterflies, mammoths and tame bears. And a clear blue sky."

"Exactly," he replied, flinging the stone into the water. "And I would have kept my blue sky, but the color would have been dishonest."

A mosquito landed on my hand, tasting me and discovering that I wasn't a caribou, flying off without drawing blood.

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"Bleak fits my mood, Mr. Locum."

I looked at him.

And again he offered his nonsmile, making me feel, if only for an instant, sorry for him.

BEAUTY, SAY SOME artists, is the delicious stew made from your subject's flaws.

Ula Lei was a beautiful young woman.

She had a hundred hectare tent pitched beside her father's home, the place filled with bio stocks and empty crystal wombs and computers capable of modeling any kind of terraforming project. She was standing beside a huge reader, waving and saying, "Come here," with the voice people use on robots. Neither polite nor intimidating.

I approached, thinking that she looked slight. Almost underfed. Where I had expected an ungraceful woman-child, I instead found a mannerly but almost distant professional. Was she embarrassed to need a tutor? Or was she unsure how to act with a stranger? Either way, the old man's warning about my "toy" status seemed overstated. Taking a frail, pretty hand, feeling the polite and passionless single shake, I went from wariness to a mild funk, wondering if I had failed some standard. It wounded me when she stared right through me, asking with a calm dry voice, "What shall we do first?"

Funk became a sense of relief, and I smiled, telling her, "Decide on our project, and its scale."

"Warm work, and huge."

I blinked. "Your father promised us a thousand hectare tent, plus any of his robots — "

"I want to use an old mine," she informed me.

"With a warm environment?"

"It has a rock floor, and we can insulate the walls and ceiling with field charges, then refrigerate as a backup." She knew the right words, at least in passing. "I've already selected which one. Here. I'll show you everything."

She was direct like her father, and confident. But Ula wasn't her father's child. Either his genes had been suppressed from conception, or they weren't included. Lean and graced with the fine features popular on tropical worlds, her body was the perfect antithesis of Provo's buttery one. Very black, very curly hair. Coffee-colored skin. And vivid green eyes. Those eyes noticed that

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I was wearing a heavy work jersey; I had changed clothes after meeting with Provo, wanting this jersey's self-heating capacity. Yet the temperature was twenty degrees warmer than the tundra, and her tropical face smiled when I pulled up my sleeves and pocketed my gloves. The humor was obvious only to her.

Then she was talking again, telling me, "The main chamber is eight kilometers by fifty, and the ceiling is ten kilometers tall in the center. Pressurized ice. Very strong." Schematics flowed past me. "The floor is the slope of a dead volcano. Father left when he found better ores."

A large operation, I noted. The rock floor would be porous and easily eroded, but rich in nutrients. Four hundred square kilometers? I had never worked on that scale, unless I counted computer simulations.

A graceful hand called up a new file. "Here's a summary of the world's best-guess history. If you're interested."

I was, but I had already guessed most of it for myself. Provo's World was like thousands of other sunless bodies in theRealm. Born in an unknown solar system, it had been thrown free by a near-collision, drifting into interstellar space, its deep seas freezing solid and its internal heat failing. In other regions it would have been terraformed directly, but our local district was impoverished when it came to metals. Provo's World had rich ores, its iron and magnesium, aluminum and the rest sucked up by industries and terraformers alike. A healthy green world requires an astonishing amount of iron, if only to keep it in hemoglobin. The iron from this old mine now circulated through dozens of worlds; and almost certainly some portion of that iron was inside me, brought home now within my own blood.

"I've already sealed the cavern," Ula informed me. "I was thinking of a river down the middle, recirculating, and a string of waterfalls — "

"No," I muttered.

She showed me a smile. "No?"

"I don't like waterfalls," I warned her.

"Because you belong to the New Traditionalist movement. I know." She shrugged her shoulders. "'Waterfalls are clichés,' you claim. 'Life, done properly, is never pretty in simple ways.'"

"Exactly."

"Yet," Ula assured me, "this is my project."

I had come an enormous distance to wage a creative battle. Trying to

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measure my opponent, I asked, "What do you know about NTs?"

"You want to regain the honesty of the original Earth. Hard winters. Droughts. Violent predation. Vibrant chaos." Her expression became coy, then vaguely wicked. "But who'd want to terraform an entire world according to your values? And who would live on it, given the chance?"

"The right people," I replied, almost by reflex.

"Not Father. He thinks terraforming should leave every place fat and green and pretty. And iron-hungry too."

"Like Beringa."

She nodded, the wickedness swelling. "Did you hear about my little mistake?"

"About the hot-sap trees? I'm afraid so."

"I guess I do need help." Yet Ula didn't appear contrite. "I know about you, Mr. Locum. After my father hired you — I told him NTs work cheap — I ordered holos of every one of your works. You like working with jungles, don't you?"

Jungles were complex and intricate. And dense. And fun.

"What about Yanci's jungle?" she asked me. "It's got a spectacular waterfall, if memory serves."

A socialite had paid me to build something bold, setting it inside a plastic cavern inside a pluto-class world. Low gravity; constant mist; an aggressive assemblage of wild animals and carnivorous plants. "Perfect," Yanci had told me. Then she hired an old-school terraformer — little more than a plumber — to add one of those achingly slow rivers and falls, popular on every low-gravity world in the Realm.

"Yes, Mr. Locum?" she teased. "What do you want to say?"

"Call me Hann," I growled.

My student pulled her hair away from her jungle-colored eyes. "I've always been interested in New Traditionalists. Not that I believe what you preach...not entirely...but I'm glad Father hired one of you."

I was thinking about my ruined jungle. Fifty years in the past, and still it made my mouth go dry and my heart pound.

"How will we move water without a river and falls?"

"Underground," I told her. "Through the porous rock. We can make a string of pools and lakes, and there won't be erosion problems for centuries."

"Like this?" She called up a new schematic, and something very much

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like my idea appeared before us. "I did this in case you didn't like my first idea."

A single waterfall was at the high end of the cavern.

"A compromise," she offered. Enlarging the image, she said, "Doesn't it look natural?"

For a cliché, I thought.

"The reactor and pumps will be behind this cliff, and the water sounds can hide any noise — "

"Fine," I told her.

" — and the entranceway too. You walk in through the falls."

Another cliché, but I said, "Fine." Years of practice had taught me to compromise with the little points. Why fight details when there were bigger wars to wage?

"Is it all right, Mr. Locum?" A wink. "I want both of us happy when this is done. Hann, I mean."

For an audience of how many? At least with shallow socialites, there were hundreds of friends and tag-alongs and nobodys and lovers. And since they rarely had enough money to fuel their lifestyles, they would open their possessions to the curious and the public.

But here I could do my best work, and who would know?

"Shall we make a jungle, Hann?"

I would know, I told myself.

And with a forced wink, I said, "Let's begin."

TERRAFORMING IS an ancient profession.

Making your world more habitable began on the Earth itself, with the first dancing fire that warmed its builder's cave; and everything since — every green world and asteroid and comet — is an enlargement on that first cozy cave. A hotter fusion fire brings heat and light, and benign organisms roam inside standardized biomes. For two hundred and ten centuries humans have expanded the Realm, mastering the tricks to bring life to a nearly dead universe. The frontier is an expanding sphere more than twenty light-years in radius — a great peaceful firestorm of life — and to date only one other living world has been discovered. *Pitcairn*. Alien and violent, and gorgeous. And the basic inspiration for the recent New Traditionalist movement. Pitcairn showed us

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how bland and domesticated our homes had become, riddled with clichés, every world essentially like every other world. Sad, sad, sad.

Here I found myself with four hundred square kilometers of raw stone. How long would it take to build a mature jungle? Done simply, a matter of months. But novelty would take longer, much to Provo's consternation. We would make fresh species, every ecological tie unique. I anticipated another year on top of the months, which was very good. We had the best computers, the best bio-stocks, and thousands of robots eager to work without pause or complaint. It was an ideal situation, I had to admit to myself. Very nearly heaven.

We insulated the ice ceiling and walls by three different means. Field charges enclosed the heated air. If they were breached, durable refrigeration elements were sunk into the ice itself. And at my insistence we added a set of emergency ducts, cold compressed air waiting in side caverns in case of tragedies. Every organism could go into a sudden dormancy, and the heat would be sucked into the huge volumes of surrounding ice. Otherwise the ceiling might sag and collapse, and I didn't want that to happen. Ula's jungle was supposed to outlast all of us. Why else go to all of this bother?

We set the reactor inside the mine shaft, behind the eventual cliché. Then lights were strung, heating the cavern's new air, and we manufactured rich soils with scrap rock and silt from Provo's own little sea. The first inhabitants were bacteria and fungi set free to chew and multiply, giving the air its first living scent. Then robots began assembling tree-shaped molds, sinking hollow roots into the new earth and a sketchwork of branches meshing overhead, beginning the future canopy.

We filled the molds with water, nutrients, and nourishing electrical currents, then inoculated them with totipotent cells. More like baking than gardening, this was how mature forest could be built from scratch. Living cells divided at an exponential rate, then assembled themselves into tissue-types — sapwood and heartwood, bark and vascular tubes. It's a kind of superheated cultivation, and how else could artists like me exist? Left to Nature's pace, anything larger than a terrarium would consume entire lives. Literally.

Within five months — on schedule — we were watching the robots break up the molds, exposing the new trees to the air. And that's a symbolic moment worth a break and a little celebration, which we held.

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Just Ula and me.

I suggested inviting Provo, but she told me, "Not yet. It's too soon to show him yet."

Perhaps. Or did she want her father kept at a distance?

I didn't ask. I didn't care. We were dining on top of a rough little hill, at the midpoint of the cavern, whiteness above and the new forest below us, leafless, resembling thousands of stately old trees pruned back by giant shears. Stubby, enduring trees. I toasted our success, and Ula grinned, almost singing when she said, "I haven't been the bother you expected, have I?"

No, she hadn't been.

"And I know more about terraforming than you thought."

More than I would admit. I nodded and said, "You're adept, considering you're self-taught."

"No," she sang, "you're the disappointment."

"Am I?"

"I expected...well, more energy. More inspiration." She rose to her feet, gesturing at our half-born creation. "I really hoped an NT would come up with bizarre wonders — "

"Like an eight-legged terror?"

"Exactly."

It had been her odd idea, and I'd dismissed it twenty times before I realized it was a game with her. She wanted an organism wholly unique, and I kept telling her that radical tailoring took too much time and too frequently failed. And besides, I added, our little patch of jungle wasn't large enough for the kind of predator she had in mind.

"I wish we could have one or two of them," she joked.

I ignored her. I'd learned that was best.

"But don't you agree? Nothing we've planned is *that* new or spectacular."

Yet I was proud of everything. What did she want? Our top three carnivores were being tailored at that moment — a new species of fire-eagle; a variation on black nightcats; and an intelligent, vicious species of monkey. Computer models showed that only two of them would survive after the first century. Which two depended on subtle, hard-to-model factors. That was one of the more radical, unpopular NT principles. "The fit survive." We build worlds with too much diversity, knowing that some of our creations are

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temporary. And unworthy. Then we stand aside, letting our worlds decide for themselves.

"I wish we could have rainstorms," she added. It was another game, and she waved her arms while saying, "Big winds. Lightning. I've always wanted to see lightning."

"There's not enough energy to drive storms," I responded. The rains were going to be mild events that came in the night. When we had nights, in a year. "I don't want to risk — "

" — damaging the ice. I know." She sat again, closer now, smiling as she said, "No, I don't care. It's coming along perfectly."

I nodded, gazing up at the brilliant white sky. The mining robots had left the ice gouged and sharp, and somehow that was appropriate. An old violence was set against a rich new order, violent in different ways. A steamy jungle cloaked in ice; an appealing, even poetic dichotomy. And while I looked into the distance, hearing the sounds of molds being torn apart and loaded onto mag-rails, my partner came even closer, touching one of my legs and asking, "How else have I surprised you?'

She hadn't touched me in months, even in passing.

It took me a moment to gather myself, and I took her hand and set it out of the way, with a surety of motion.

She said nothing, smiling and watching me.

And once again, for the umpteenth time, I wondered what Ula was thinking. Because I didn't know and couldn't even guess. We had been together for months, our relationship professional and bloodless. Yet I always had the strong impression that she showed me what she wanted to show me, and I couldn't even guess how much of that was genuine.

"How else?" she asked again.

"You're an endless surprise," I told her.

But instead of appearing pleased, she dipped her head, the smile changing to a concentrated stare, hands drawing rounded shapes in the new soil, then erasing them with a few quick tiger swipes.

I met Provo behind the waterfall, in the shaft, his sturdy shape emerging from the shadows; and he gave me a nod and glanced at the curtain of water, never pausing, stepping through and vanishing with a certain indifference. I followed, knowing where the flow was weakest — where I would be the least

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soaked — and stepped out onto a broad rock shelf, workboots gripping and my dampened jersey starting to dry itself.

The old man was gazing into the forest.

I asked, "Would you like a tour?" Then I added, "We could ride one of the mag-rails, or we could walk."

"No," he replied. "Neither."

Why was he here? Provo had contacted me, no warning given. He had asked about his daughter's whereabouts. "She's in the lab," I had said, "mutating beetles." Leave her alone, he had told me. Provo wanted just the two of us for his first inspection.

Yet now he acted indifferent to our accomplishments, dropping his head and walking off the rock shelf and stopping, then looking back at me. And over the sound of tumbling water, he asked, "How is she?"

"Ula's fine."

"No troubles with her?" he inquired.

It was several weeks after our hilltop celebration, and I barely remembered the hand on my leg. "She's doing a credible job."

Provo appeared disappointed.

I asked him, "How should she be?'

He didn't answer. "She likes you, Mr. Locum. We've talked about you. She's told me, more than once...that you're *perfect.*"

I felt a sudden warmth, and I smiled.

Disappointment faded. "How is she? Speaking as her teacher, of course."

"Bright. Maybe more than bright." I didn't want to praise too much, lifting his expectations. "She has inspirations, as she calls them. Some are workable, and some are even lovely."

"Inspirations," he echoed.

I readied some examples. I thought Provo would want them, enjoying this chance to have a parent's pride. But instead he looked off into the trees again, the stubby branches sprouting smaller branches and fat green leaves. He seemed to be hunting for something specific, old red eyes squinting. Finally he said, "No." He said, "I shouldn't tell you."

"Tell me?"

"Because you don't need to know." He sighed and turned, suddenly older and almost frail. "If she's been on her best behavior, maybe I should keep my mouth shut."

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I said nothing for a long moment.

Provo shuffled across the clearing, sitting on a downed log with a certain gravity. The log had been grown in the horizontal position, then killed. Sitting next to him, I asked, "What is it, Mr. Lei?"

"My daughter."

"Yes?"

"She isn't."

I nodded and said, "Adopted."

"Did she tell you?"

"I know genetics. And I didn't think you'd suppress your own genes."

He looked at the waterfall. It was extremely wide and not particularly tall, spilling onto the shelf and then into a large pond. A pair of mag-rails carried equipment in and out on the far shore. Otherwise little moved. I noticed a tiny tag-along mosquito who wouldn't bite either of us. It must have come from the tundra, and it meant nothing. It would die in a few hours, I thought; and Provo suddenly told me, "Adopted, yes. And I think it's fair to tell you the circumstances."

Why the tension?

"I'm quite good at living alone, Mr. Locum. That's one of the keys to my success." He paused, then said, "I came to this world alone. I charted it and filed my claims and defended it from the jealous mining corporations. Every moment of my life has gone into these mines, and I'm proud of my accomplishments. Life. My metals have brought life and prosperity to millions, and I make no apologies. Do you understand me?"

I said, "Yes."

"Few people come here. Like that freighter that brought you, most of the ships are unmanned." Another pause. "But there are people who make their livelihood riding inside the freighters. Perhaps you've known a few of them."

I hadn't, no.

"They are people. They exist on a continuum. All qualities of human beings live inside those cramped quarters, some of them entirely decent. Honest. Capable of more compassion than I could hope to feel."

I nodded, no idea where we were going.

"Ula's biological parents weren't at that end of the continuum. Believe me. When I first saw her...when I boarded her parents' ship to supervise the loading...well, I won't tell you what I saw. And smelled. And learned about

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the capacities of other human beings. Some things are best left behind, I think. Let's forget them. Please."

"How old was Ula?"

"A child. Three standard years, that time." A small strong hand wiped at his sweating face. "Her parents purchased loads of mixed metals from me, then sold them to one of the water worlds near Beringa. To help plankton bloom, I imagine. And for two years, every day, I found myself remembering that tiny girl, pitying her, a kind of guilt building inside me because I'd done nothing to help her, nothing at all." Again the hands tried to dry his face, squeezed drops of perspiration almost glittering on them. "And yet, Mr. Locum, I was thankful too. Glad that I would never see her again. I assumed...I knew...that space itself would swallow them. That someone else would save her. That her parents would change. That I wouldn't be involved again, even if I tried — "

"They came back," I muttered.

Provo straightened his back, grimacing as if in pain. "Two years later, yes." Brown eyes closed, opened. "They sent me word of their arrival, and in an instant a plan occurred to me. All at once I knew the right thing to do." Eyes closed and stayed closed. "I was onboard, barely one quick glance at that half-starved child, and with a self-righteous voice I told the parents, 'I want to adopt her. Name your price.'"

"Good," I offered.

He shook his head. "You must be like me. We assume, and without reasons, that those kinds of people are simple predatory monsters. Merely selfish. Merely cruel." The eyes opened once again. "But what I realized since is that Ula...Ula was in some way essential to that bizarre family. I'm not saying they loved her. It's just that they couldn't sell her anymore than they could kill her. Because if she died, who else would they have to torture?"

I said nothing.

"They couldn't be bought, I learned. Quickly." Provo swallowed and grabbed the log, knuckles pale as the hands shook. "You claim my daughter is well-behaved, and I'm pleased. You say she's bright, and I'm not at all surprised. And since you seem to have her confidence and trust, I think it's only fair to tell you about her past. To warn you."

"How did you adopt her?"

He took a deep breath and held it.

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"If they couldn't be bribed...?" I touched one of the thick arms. "What happened?"

"Nothing." A shrug of the shoulders, then he said, "There was an accident. During the loading process. The work can be dangerous, even deadly, when certain equipment fails."

I felt very distant, very calm.

"An accident," he repeated.

I gave him a wary glance, asking. "Does she know what happened?"

Provo's eyes opened wide, almost startled. "About the accident? Nothing! About her past life? She remembers, I'm sure...nothing. None of it." Just the suggestion of memories caused him to nearly panic. "No, Mr. Locum...you see, once I had legal custody...even before then...I paid an expert from Beringa to come here and examine her, and treat her...with every modern technique — "

"What kind of expert?'

"In psychology, you idiot! What do you think I mean?" Then he gave a low moan, pulling loose a piece of fibrous bark. "To save her. To wipe away every bad memory and heal her, which he did quite well. A marvelous job of it. I paid him a bonus. He deserved it." He threw the bark onto the pond. "I've asked Ula about her past, a thousand times...and she remembers none of it. The expert said she might, or that it might come out in peculiar ways...but she doesn't and has no curiosity about those times...and maybe I shouldn't have told you, I'm sorry...!"

I looked at the pond, deep and clear, some part of me wondering how soon we would inoculate it with algae and water weeds.

Then Provo stood again, telling me, "Of course I came to look around, should she ask. And tell her...tell her that I'm pleased...."

I gave a quick compliant nod.

"It's too warm for my taste." He made a turn, gazing into the jungle and saying, "But shady. Sometimes I like a place with shade, and it's pleasant enough, I suppose." He swallowed and gave a low moan, then said, "And tell her for me, please...that I'm very much looking forward to the day it's done...."

Terraformers build their worlds at least twice.

The first time it is a model, a series of assumptions and hard numbers

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inside the best computers; and the second time it is wood and flesh, false sunlight and honest sound. And that second incarnation is never the same as the model. It's an eternal lesson learned by every terraformer, and by every other person working with complexity.

Models fail.

Reality conspires.

There is always, always some overlooked or mismeasured factor, or a stew of factors. And it's the same for people too. A father and a teacher speak about the daughter and the student, assuming certain special knowledge; and together they misunderstand the girl, their models having little to do with what is true.

Worlds are easy to observe.

Minds are secretive. And subtle. And molding them is never so easy and clear as the molding of mere worlds, I think.

ULA AND I were working deep in the cavern, a few days after Provo's visit, teaching our robots how and where to plant an assortment of newly tailored saplings. We were starting our understory, vines and shrubs and shade-tolerant trees to create a dense tangle. And the robots struggled, designed to wrestle metals from rocks, not to baby the first generations of new species. At one point I waded into the fray, trying to help, shouting and grabbing at a mechanical arm while taking a blind step, a finger-long spine plunging into my ankle.

Ula laughed, watching me hobble backward. Then she turned sympathetic, absolutely convincing when she said, "Poor darling." She thought we should move to the closest water and clean out my wound. "It looks like it's swelling, Hann."

It was. I had designed this plant with an irritating protein, and I joked about the value of field testing, using a stick as my impromptu crutch. Thankfully we were close to one of the ponds, and the cool spring water felt wondrous, Ula removing my boot and the spine while I sprawled out on my back, eyes fixed on the white expanse of ice and lights, waiting for the pain to pass.

"If you were an ordinary terraformer," she observed, "this wouldn't have happened."

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"I'd be somewhere else, and rich," I answered.

She moved from my soaking foot to my head, sitting beside me, knees pulled to her face and patches of perspiration darkening her lightweight work jersey. "'Red of tooth and claw,'" she quoted.

A New Traditionalist motto. We were building a wilderness of spines and razored leaves; and later we'd add stinging wasps and noxious beetles, plus a savage biting midge that would attack in swarms. "Honest testing nature," I muttered happily.

Ula grinned and nodded, one of her odd expressions growing. And she asked, "But why can't we do more?"

More?

"Make the fire eagles attack us on sight, for instance. If we're after bloody claws — "

"No," I interrupted. "That has no ecological sense at all." Fire eagles were huge, but they'd never prey on humans.

"Oh, sure. I forgot."

She hadn't, and both of us knew it. Ula was playing another game with me.

I looked across the water, trying to ignore her. The far shore was a narrow stretch of raw stone, and the air above it would waver, field charges setting up their barrier against the heat. Beyond, not twenty meters beyond, was a rigid and hard-frozen milky wall that lifted into the sky, becoming the sky, part of me imagining giant eagles flying overhead, hunting for careless children.

"What's special about the original Earth?" I heard. "Tell me again, please, Hann."

No, I wouldn't. But even as I didn't answer, I answered. In my mind I was thinking about three billion years of natural selection, amoral and frequently short-sighted...and wondrous in its beauty, power, and scope...and how we in the Realm had perfected a stupefying version of that wonder, a million worlds guaranteed to be safe and comfortable for the trillions of souls clinging to them.

"Here," said Ula, "we should do everything like the original Earth."

I let myself ask, "What do you mean?"

"Put in things that make ecological sense. Like diseases and poisonous snakes, for instance."

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"And we can be imprisoned for murder when the first visitor dies."

"But we aren't going to have visitors," she warned me. "So why not? A viper with a nerve toxin in its fangs? Or maybe some kind of plague carried by those biting midges that you're so proud of."

She was joking, I thought. Then I felt a sudden odd doubt.

Ula's entire face smiled, nothing about it simple. "What's more dangerous? Spines or no spines?"

"More dangerous?"

"For us." She touched my ankle, watching me.

"Spines," I voted.

"Back on Earth," she continued, "there were isolated islands. And the plants that colonized them would lose their spines and toxic chemicals, their old enemies left behind. And birds would lose their power of flight. And the tortoises grew huge, nothing to compete with them. Fat, easy living."

"What's your point, teacher?"

She laughed and said, "We arrived. We brought goats and rats and ourselves, and the native life would go extinct."

"I know history," I assured her.

"Not having spines is more dangerous than having them."

I imagined that I understood her point, nodding now and saying, "See? That's what NTs argue. Not quite in those terms — "

"Our worlds are like islands, soft and easy."

"Exactly." I grinned and nodded happily. "What I want to do here, and everywhere — "

"You're not much better," she interrupted.

No?

"Not much at all," she grumbled, her expression suddenly black. Sober. "Nature is so much more cruel and honest than you'd ever be."

Suddenly I was thinking about Provo's story, that non-description of Ula's forgotten childhood. It had been anything but soft and easy, and I felt pity; and I felt curiosity, wondering if she had nightmares and then, for an instant, wondering if I could help her in some important way.

Ula was watching me, reading my expression.

Without warning she bent close, kissing me before I could react and then sitting up again, laughing like a silly young girl.

I asked, "Why did you do that?"

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"Why did I stop, you mean?"

I swallowed, saying nothing.

Then she bent over again, kissing me again, pausing to whisper, "Why don't we?"

I couldn't find any reason to stop.

And suddenly she was removing her jersey, and mine, and I looked past her for an instant, blinding myself with the glare of lights and white ice, all at once full of reasons why we should stop and my tongue stolen out of my mouth.

I was Ula's age when I graduated from the Academy. The oldest teacher on the staff invited me into her office, congratulated me for my good grades, then asked me in a matter-of-fact way, "Where do these worlds we build actually live, Mr. Locum? Can you point to where they are?"

She was cranky and ancient, her old black flesh turning white from simple age. I assumed that she was having troubles with her mind, the poor woman. A shrug; a gracious smile. Then I told her, "I don't know, ma'am. I would think they live where they live."

A smartass answer, if there ever was.

But she wasn't startled or even particularly irritated by my non-reply, a long lumpy finger lifting into the air between us, then pointing at her own forehead. "In our minds, Mr. Locum. That's the only place they can live for us, because where else can we live?"

"May I go?" I asked, unamused.

She said, "Yes."

I began to rise to my feet.

And she told me, "You are a remarkably stupid man, I think, Mr. Locum. Untalented and vain and stupid in many fundamental ways, and you have a better chance of success than most of your classmates."

"I'm leaving," I warned her.

"No." She shook her head. "You aren't here even now."

We were one week into our honeymoon — sex and sleep broken up with the occasional bout of work followed with a swim — and we were lying naked on the shore of the first pond. Ula looked at me, smiling and touching me, then saying, "You know, this world once was alive."

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Her voice was glancingly saddened, barely audible over the quiet clean splash of the cliché. I nodded, saying, "I realize that." Then I waited for whatever would follow. I had learned about her lectures during the last seven days.

"It was an ocean world, just three billion years ago." She drew a planet on my chest. "Imagine if it hadn't been thrown away from its sun. If it had evolved complex life. If some kind of intelligent, tool-using fish had built spaceships — "

"Very unlikely," I countered.

She shrugged and asked, "Have you seen our fossils?"

No, but I didn't need to see them. Very standard types. The Realm was full of once-living worlds.

"This sea floor," she continued, "was dotted with hot-water vents, and bacteria evolved and lived by consuming metal ions — "

" — which they laid down, making the ore that you mine," I interrupted. With growing impatience, I asked, "Why tell me what I already know, Ula?"

"How do you think it would feel? Your world is thrown free of your sun, growing cold and freezing over...nothing you can do about it...and how would you feel...?"

The vents would have kept going until the planet's tepid core grew cold, too little radioactivity to stave off the inevitable. "But we're talking about bacteria," I protested. "Nothing sentient. Unless you've found something bigger in the fossil record."

"Hardly," she said. Then she sat upright, small breasts catching the light and my gaze. "I was just thinking."

I braced myself.

"I remember when Father showed me one of the old vents...the first one I ever saw...."

I doubly braced myself.

"I was five or six, I suppose, and we were walking through a new mine, down a dead rift valley, two hundred kilometers under the frozen sea. He pointed to mounds of dirty ore, then he had one of his robots slice into one of them, showing me the striations...how layers of bacteria had grown, by the trillion...outnumbering the human race, he said...and I cried...."

"Did you?"

"Because they had died." She appeared close to tears again, but one hand

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casually scratched her breasts. Then the face brightened, almost smiling as she asked, "What's your favorite world?"

Changing subjects? I couldn't be sure.

"Your own world, or anyone's. Do you have favorites?"

Several of them, yes. I described the most famous world — a small spinning asteroid filled with wet forest — and I told her about the artists, all terraformers who had journeyed to the alien world of Pitcairn. They were the first New Traditionalists. I had never seen the work for myself, ten light-years between us and it, but I'd walked through the holos, maybe hundreds of times. The artists had been changed by Pitcairn. They never used alien lifeforms — there are tough clear laws against the exporting of Pitcairn life — but they had twisted earthly species to capture something of the strangeness and strength of the place. And I couldn't do it justice. I found myself blabbering about the quality of light and the intensity of certain golden birds...and at some point I quit speaking, realizing that Ula wasn't paying attention to me.

She heard silence and said, "It sounds intriguing." Then with a slow, almost studied pose, she said, "Let me tell you about something even more fascinating."

I felt a moment of anger. *How dare she ignore me!* Then the emotion evaporated, betraying me, leaving me to wait while she seemed to gather herself, her face never more serious or composed. Or focused. Or complete.

"It was the second world that I built," I heard. "My first world was too large and very clumsy, and I destroyed it by accident. But no matter. What I did that second time was find a very small abandoned mine, maybe a hectare in size, and I reinforced the ice walls and filled the chamber with water, then sank a small reactor into the rock, opening up the ancient plumbing and inoculating the water with a mixture of bacteria — "

"Did you?" I sputtered.

" — and reestablishing one vent community. After three billion years of sleep. I fueled the reactor with a measured amount of deuterium, and I enriched the warming water with the proper metals." A pause. "New striations formed. Superheated black goo was forced from the fossil tubes. And I dressed in a strong pressure suit and walked into that world, and I sat just like we're sitting here, and waited."

I swallowed. "Waited?"

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"The reactor slowed, then stopped." Ula took a breath and said, "I watched. With the lights on my suit down low, I watched the black goo stop rising, and the water cooled, and eventually new ice began to form against the walls. I moved to the center, sitting among the tubes...for days, for almost two weeks...the ice walls closing in on me — "

"That's crazy," I blurted.

And she shrugged as if to say, "I don't care." A smile emerged, then vanished, and she turned and touched me, saying, "I allowed myself to be frozen into that new ice, my limbs locked in place, my power packs running dry — "

"But why?" I asked. "So you'd know how it felt?"

And she didn't seem to hear me, tilting her head, seemingly listening to some distant sound worthy of her complete attention. Eventually she said, "Father missed me." A pause. "He came home from a tour of distant mines, and I was missing, and he sent robots out to find me, and they cut me free just before I would have begun to truly suffer."

The girl was insane. I knew it.

She took a dramatic breath, then smiled. Her haunted expression vanished in an instant, without effort, and again she was a student, the youngster, and my lover. A single bead of perspiration was rolling along her sternum, then spreading across her taut brown belly; and I heard myself asking, "Why did you do that shit?"

But the youngster couldn't or wouldn't explain herself, dipping her head and giggling into my ear.

"You could have died," I reminded her.

She said, "Don't be angry, darling. Please?"

An unstable, insane woman-child, and suddenly I was aware of my own heartbeat.

"Are you angry with sweet me?" She reached for me, for a useful part of me, asking. "How can I make you happy, darling?"

"Be normal," I whispered.

"Haven't you paid attention?" The possessed expression reemerged for an instant. "I'm not and never have been. Normal. My darling."

My excuse, after much thought and practice, was a conference with her father. "I want us to have a backup reactor. In case."

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She dismissed the possibility out of hand. "He won't give us one."

"And I want to walk on the surface. For a change of scenery." I paused, then camouflaged my intentions by asking, "Care to walk with me?"

"God, no. I've had enough of those walks, thank you."

Freed for the day, I began by visiting the closest caverns and one deflated tent, poking through dead groves and chiseling up samples of soil and frozen pond water. The cold was absolute. The sky was black and filled with stars, a few dim green worlds lost against the chill. Running quick tests, I tried to identify what had gone wrong and where. Sometimes the answer was obvious; sometimes I was left with guesses. But each of her worlds was undeniably dead, hundreds and thousands of new species extinct before they had any chance to prosper.

Afterward I rode the mag-rail back to Provo's house, finding where the hot-sap trees had been planted, the spot marked with a shallow lake created when the permafrost melted. I worked alone for twenty minutes, then the owner arrived. He seemed unhurried, yet something in his voice or his forward tilt implied a genuine concern. Or maybe not. I'd given up trying to decipher their damned family.

Pocketing my field instruments, I told Provo, "She's a good tailor. Too good." No greetings. No preparatory warning. I just informed him, "I've watched her, and you can't tell me that she'd introduce a toxic metabolite by accident. Not Ula."

The old man's face grew a shade paler, his entire body softening; and he leaned against a boulder, telling me without the slightest concern, "That possibility has crossed my mind, yes."

I changed topics, Ula-fashion. "When we met you warned me not to get too close to her. And not to be too honest."

"I remember."

"How do you know? Who else has been here?"

No answer.

"She's had another tutor, hasn't she?"

"Never."

"Then how can you know?"

"Twice," Provo told me, "my daughter has taken lovers. Two different crew members from separate freighters. Dullards, both of them. With each there was a period of bliss. They stayed behind and helped Ula with her work,

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then something would go wrong. I don't know any details. I refuse to spy on my own daughter. But with the man, her first lover...he expressed an interest in leaving, I believe...in returning to his vocation...."

"What happened?"

"Ula pierced the wall of the tent. A year's work was destroyed in a few minutes." The man sighed, betraying a huge fatigue. "She told me that it was an accident, that she intended just to scare him — "

"She murdered him?" I managed.

And Provo laughed with relief. "No, no. No, the dullard was able to climb into an emergency suit in time, saving himself."

"What about the other lover?"

"The woman?" A strong shrug of the shoulders, then he said, "A fire. Another accident. I know less, but I surmise they had had a spat of some kind. A ridiculous, wasteful fit of anger. Although Ula claimed not to have started the blaze. She acted thoroughly innocent, and astonishingly unrepentant."

I swallowed, then whispered, "Your daughter is disturbed."

Provo said, "And didn't I warn you? Did you not understand me?" The soft face was perspiring despite the chill air. A cloud of mosquitoes drifted between us, hunting suitable game. "How much forewarning did you require, Mr. Locum?"

I said nothing.

"And you've done so well, too. Better than I had hoped possible, I should tell you."

I opened my mouth, and I said nothing.

"She told me...yesterday, I think...how important you are to her education — "

"The poison," I interrupted.

Provo quit speaking.

"There's a residue here. In the soil." I showed him a molecule displayed on my portable reader. "It's a synthetic alkaloid. Very messy, very tough. And very, very intentional, I think." A moment's pause, then I asked him, "Has it occurred to you that she was trying to murder you?"

"Naturally," he responded, in an instant.

"And?"

"And she didn't try. No."

"How can you feel sure?"

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"You claim that my daughter is bright. Is talented. If she wanted to kill me, even if she was an idiot, don't you think that right now I would be dead?"

Probably true, I thought.

"Two people alone on an empty world. Nothing would be simpler than the perfect murder, Mr. Locum."

"Then what did she want?" I gestured at the little lake. "What was *this* about?"

Provo appeared disgusted, impatient.

He told me, "I might have hoped that you could explain it to me."

I imagined Ula on the bottom of a freezing sea, risking death in some bid to understand...what? And three times she had endangered others...which left another dozen creations that she had killed...and was she alone in each of them when they died...?

"Discover her purpose, Mr. Locum, and perhaps I'll give you a bonus. If that's permissible."

I said nothing.

"You have been following my suggestions, haven't you? You aren't becoming too entangled with her, are you?"

I looked at Provo.

And he read my face, shaking his head with heavy sadness, saying, "Oh, my, Mr. Locum. Oh, my."

PURPOSE.

The possibility gnawed at me. I assumed some kind of madness lay over whatever her rationale, and I wished for a degree in psychiatry, or maybe some life experience with insanity. Anything would help. Riding the mag-rail back into our cavern, replaying the last few months in my mind, I heard part of me begging for me to flee, to turn now and take refuge where I could, then stow away on the first freighter to pass —

— which was impossible, I realized in the same instant. Not to mention dangerous. Acting normal was important, I told myself. Then aloud, I said, "Just keep her happy."

I have never been more terrified of a human being.

Yet Ula seemed oblivious. She greeted me with a kiss and demanded more, and I failed her, nervousness and a sudden fatigue leaving me soft. But

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she explained it away as stress and unimportant, cuddling up next to me on the shady jungle floor. She said, "Let's sleep," and I managed to close my eyes and drift into a broken dreamy sleep, jerking awake to find myself alone.

Where had the girl gone?

I called her on our com-line, hearing her voice and my voice dry and clumsy, asking her, "Where are you?"

"Mutating treefrogs, darling."

Which put her inside her home. Out of my way. I moved to the closest workstation, asking its reader to show me the original schematics and everything that we had done to date; and I opened up my jersey — I was still wearing my heavy, cold-weather jersey — drops of salty water splattering on the reader. I was hunting for anything odd or obviously dangerous. A flaw in the ice roof? None that I could find. A subtle poison in our young trees? None that showed in the genetic diagrams. But just to be sure, I tested myself. Nothing wrong in my blood, I learned. What else? There was one oddity, something that I might have noticed before but missed. The trees had quirks in their chemistry. Nothing deadly. Just curious. I was studying a series of sugars, wondering when Ula had slipped them into the tailoring process, and why; and just then, as if selecting the perfect moment, she said, "Darling," with a clear close voice. Then, "What are you doing?"

I straightened my back, and I turned.

Ula was standing behind me, the smile bright and certain. And strange. She said, "Hello?" and then, "What are you doing, darling?"

I blanked the reader.

Then with the stiffest possible voice, I told her, "Nothing. Just checking details."

She approached, taking me around my waist.

I hugged her, wondering what to do.

Then she released me, pulling back her hair while asking, "What did you and my father decide?"

Swallowing was impossible, my throat full of dust.

"I forgot to ask before. Do we get a second reactor?"

I managed to shake my head. No.

"An unnecessary expense," she said, perfectly mimicking her father's voice. She couldn't have acted more normal, walking around me while asking, "Has the nap helped?"

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I watched her undress as she moved.

"Feel like fun?"

Why was I afraid? There weren't any flaws in our work, I knew, and as long as she was with me, nude and in my grasp, what could she do to me? Nothing, and I became a little confident. At least confident enough to accomplish the task at hand, the event feeling robotic and false, and entirely safe.

Afterward she said, "That was the best," and I knew — knew without doubt — that Ula was lying. "The best ever," she told me, kissing my nose and mouth and upturned throat. "We'll never have a more perfect moment. Can I ask you something?"

"What...?"

She said, "It's something that I've considered. For a long while, I've been wondering — "

"What?"

"About the future." She straddled me, pressure on my stomach. The grin was sly and expectant. "When Father dies, I inherit this world. All of it and his money too, and his robots. Everything."

A slight nod, and I said, "Yes?"

"What will I do with it?"

I had no idea.

"What if I bought an artificial sun? Not fancy. And brought it here and put it in orbit. I've estimated how long it would take to melt this sea, if I hurried things along by seeding the ice with little reactors — "

"Decades," I interrupted.

"Two or three, I think. And then I could terraform an entire world." She paused, tilting her head and her eyes lifting. "Of course all of this would be destroyed. Which is sad." She sighed, shrugging her shoulders. "How many people have my kind of wealth, Hann? In the entire Realm, how many?"

"I don't know."

"And who already own a world too. How many?"

"Very few."

"And who have an interest in terraforming, of course." She giggled and said, "I could be one of a kind. It's possible."

It was.

"What I want to ask," she said, "is this. Would you, Hann Locum, like

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to help me? To remake all of this ice and rock with me?"

I opened my mouth, then hesitated.

"Because I don't deserve all the fun for myself," she explained, climbing off me. "Wouldn't that be something? You might be the first NT terraformer with your own world. Wouldn't that make you the envy of your peers?"

"Undoubtedly," I whispered.

Ula walked to her clothes, beginning to dress. "Are you interested?"

I said, "Yes. Sure." True or not, I wanted to make agreeable sounds. Then I made myself add, "But your father's in good health. It could be a long time before — "

"Oh, yeah." A glib shrug of her shoulders; a vague little-girl smile. "I hope it's years and years away. I do."

I watched the girl's face, unable to pierce it. I couldn't guess what she was really thinking, not even when she removed the odd control from one of her deep pockets. A simple device, homemade and held in her right hand; and now she winked at me, saying, "I know."

Know?

"What both of you talked about today. Of course I know."

The pressure on my chest grew a thousandfold.

"The mosquitoes? Some aren't. They're electronic packages dressed up as mosquitoes, and I always hear what Father says — "

Shit.

" — and have for years. Always."

I sat upright, hands digging into the damp black soil.

She laughed and warned me, "You're not the first person to hear his confession. I am sorry. He has this guilt, and he salves it by telling people who can't threaten him. I suppose he wanted you to feel sorry for him, and to admire him — "

"What do you remember?"

"Of my parents? Nothing." She shook her head. "Everything." A nod and the head tilted, and she told me, "I do have one clear image. I don't know if it's memory or if it's a dream, or what. But I'm a child inside a smelly freighter, huddled in a corner, watching Provo Lei strangle my real mother. He doesn't know I'm there, of course." A pause. "If he had known, do you suppose he would have strangled me too? To save himself, perhaps?"

"I'm sorry," I muttered.

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And she laughed, the sound shrill. Complex. "Why? He's a very good father, considering. I love him, and I can't blame him for anything." A pause, then with a caring voice she told me, "I love him quite a lot more than I love you, Hann."

I moved, the ground under my butt creaking; and I had to say, "But you poisoned him anyway."

Ula waved her control with a flourish, telling me, "I poisoned everything. All I wanted was for Father to watch." A shrug. "I tried to make him understand...to comprehend...but I don't think he could ever appreciate what I was trying to tell him. Never."

I swallowed, then asked, "What were you telling him?"

Her eyes grew huge, then a finger was wagged at me. "No. No, you don't." She took a small step backward, shaking her head. "I think it's just a little too soon for that. Dear."

I waited.

Then she waved the control again, saying, "Look up, Hann. Will you? Now?"

"Up?" I whispered.

"This direction." She pointed at the canopy. "This is *up*."

My gaze lifted,the solid green ceiling of leaves glowing, branches like veins running through the green; and she must have activated the control, a distinct click followed by her calm voice saying, "I left out parts of the schematics, Hann. Intentionally. Before you were even hired, you should know."

There was a distant rumbling noise.

The ground moved, tall trees swaying for an instant; then came a flash of light with instant thunder, a bolt of electricity leaping down the long cavern, the force of it swatting me down against the forest floor, heat against my face and chest, every hair on my body lifting for a terrible long instant.

Then it was gone again.

Everything was.

The lights had failed, a perfect seamless night engulfing the world; and twice I heard a laugh, close and then distant.

Then nothing.

And I screamed, the loudest sound I could muster lost in the leaves and

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against the tree trunks, fading into echoes and vanishing, as if it had never existed at all.

My jersey...where was my jersey...?

I made myself stand and think, perfectly alert, trying to remember where it had lain and counting steps in my mind...one step, and two, and three. Then I knelt and found nothing in reach, nothing but the rich new soil, and for a terrified instant I wondered if Ula had stolen my clothes, leaving me naked as well as blind.

But another step and grope gave me my boots, then the jersey. I dressed and found my various equipment in the pockets and pouches. The portable reader had been cooked by the lightning, but the glowglobes were eager. I ignited one of them and released it; it hovered over me, moving with a faint dry hum as it emitted a yellowish light.

I walked to the closest mag-rail.

Inoperative.

Nearby were a pair of robots standing like statues.

Dead.

I started to jog uphill, moving fast. Where was Ula? Had she gone somewhere, or was she nearby, watching me?

It was fifteen kilometers to the waterfall, the exit. The trees seemed larger in the very weak light, the open jungle floor feeling rather like a place of worship. A cathedral. Then came a wall of vines and thorny brush — our earliest plantings — and I burrowed into them, pushing despite the stabs at my skin, breaking into an open unfinished glade and pausing. Something was wrong, I thought. Against my face was cold air, bitter and sudden. Of course the field generators were down. And the refrigeration elements. What remained was the passive emergency system, heat rising into high ducts while others released cubic kilometers of stored air from below.

How long would the process take?

I couldn't remember, could scarcely think about anything. My jersey automatically warmed me, and I helped keep warm by running fast, pulling ahead of my glowglobe, my frantic shadow gigantic and ethereal.

In my head, in simple terms, I handled the mathematics.

Calories; volume; turbulence; time.

Halfway to the waterfall, feeling the distance and the grade, I had a terrible sudden premonition.

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Slowing, I said, "Where are you?"

Then I screamed, "Ula! Ula!?"

In the chill air my voice carried, and when it died there was a new sound, clear and strong and very distant. A howl; a wild inhuman moan. I took a weak step sideways and faltered. Somehow I felt as if I should know the source...and I remembered Ula's eight-legged predator, swift and smart and possibly on the hunt now. *She had made it...!*

There was a motion, a single swirling something coming out of the gloom at me. I grunted and twisted, falling down, and a leaf landed at my feet. Brown and cold. Partly cooked by the lightning, I realized. It crumbled when my hand closed around it. Then came the howl again, seemingly closer, and again I was running, sprinting uphill, into another band of prickly underbrush and starting to sob with the authority of a beaten child.

The ambient temperature was plummeting.

My breath showed in my glowglobe's yellow light, lifting and thinning and mixing with more falling leaves. The forest was slipping into dormancy. A piece of me was thankful, confident that it at least would survive whatever happened; and most of me was furious with Ula — a simple, visceral fury — as I imagined my escape and the filing of criminal complaints. Attempted murder. Malicious endangerment. And straight murder charges on Provo, me as witness for the prosecution and their lives here finished. Extinguished. Lost.

"I'm going to escape," I muttered at the shadows. "Ula? Are you listening? Ula?"

I pulled gloves from a pocket, covering my cold hands and them knitting into my sleeves. Then I unrolled my jersey's simple hood, tying it flush against my head, enjoying the heat of the fabric. Leaves were falling in a steady brown blizzard. They covered the freezing earth, crunching with each footfall, and sometimes in the crunches I thought I heard someone or something else moving. Pausing, I would listen. Wait. The predator? Or Ula? But the next howl seemed distant and perhaps confused, and it had to be the girl whom I heard. Who wouldn't be fooled with my stop and then go and stop again tricks.

The cavern's upper end was bitter cold. One of our emergency ducts had opened up beside the entranceway, robbing the heat from the water and ground and trees. Already the pond was freezing, the ice clear and hard, very

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nearly flawless. I ran on its shore, squinting into the gloom, believing that at least the cliché, the falls, would have stopped flowing when the power failed. Not in an instant, no. But its reservoir was relatively small — Ula had shown me her plans — and for a glorious instant I was absolutely convinced that my escape was imminent.

What was that? From the gloom came an apparent wall of marble, white and thick and built where the cliché had been. *Frozen...the waterfall had frozen clear through...!*

I moaned, screamed, and slowed.

Beside the pond was one of the useless robots. I moved to it, my breath freezing against the ceramic skin, and with a few desperate tugs I managed to pry free one of its hands. The hand was meant for cutting, for chopping, and I held it like an axe, growling at my audience. "What did you think? That I'd just give up now?"

No answer. The only sounds were the falling of leaves and the occasional creaking pop as sap froze inside the sleeping trees.

I moved to the icy shelf at the base of the falls, shuffling to where I normally walked through, where the ice should be thinnest. Three times I swung, twice without force and the third blow hard and useless, the ice as tough as marble and more slippery. My axe slid sideways, twisting me. Then my boots moved, my balance lost, and I hit the icy shelf, slid, and fell again.

The pond caught me. The ice beneath gave with the impact, a slight but deep cracking sound lasting for an age. But I didn't fall through. And when I could breathe again, with pain, I stood and hobbled over to the shore, trying very hard not to give in.

"Is this what you did to the others?" I asked.

Silence.

"Is this how you treat lovers, Ula?"

A howl, almost close, sudden and very shrill.

A primeval thought came to me. I made myself approach the black jungle, scooping up leaves by the armful and building a substantial pile of them where I had sat with Provo, against the downed log. And I lit them and the log on fire with a second glowglobe, putting it on overload and stepping back and the globe detonating with a wet sizzle, the dried leaves exploding into a smoky red fire.

The odd sugars loved to burn, the flames hot and quick and delicious.

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They ignited the log within minutes, giving me a sense of security. The canopy didn't reach overhead. I made doubly sure that the surrounding ground had no leaves, no way for the fire to spread; then I set to work, armfuls of fresh leaves piled against the cliché, tamped them down with my boots until there was a small hill spilling onto the pond.

Heat versus ice.

Equations and estimates kept me focused, unafraid.

Then I felt ready, using the axe to knock loose a long splinter of burning log. I carried the cold end, shouting, "See? See? I'm not some idiot. I'm not staying in your trap, Ula!" I touched the leaf pile in a dozen places, then retreated, keeping at what felt like a safe distance but feeling waves regardless, dry and solid heat playing over me, almost nourishing me for the moment.

Those sugars were wonderfully potent. Almost explosive.

Ula must have planned to burn me alive, I kept thinking. She would have lit the leaf litter when it was deep enough...only I'd beaten her timetable, hadn't I?

"I'll file charges," I promised the red-lit trees. "You should have done a better job, my dear."

A sharp howl began, then abruptly stopped. It was as if a recording had been turned off in its middle.

Then came a crashing sound, and I turned to see a single chunk of softened ice breaking free of the cliché, crashing into my fire and throwing sparks in every direction. Watching the sparks, I felt worry and a sudden fatigue. *What's wrong?* My eyes lifted, maybe out of instinct, and I noticed a single platter-sized leaf still rising, glowing red and obviously different from the other leaves. It was burning slowly, almost patiently. It practically soared overhead. Just like a fire eagle, it rode a thermal...and didn't it resemble an eagle? A little bit? One species of tree among hundreds, and Ula must have designed it, and she must have seen that it was planted here —

— such an elaborate, overly complicated plan. Contrived and plainly artificial, I was thinking. Part of me felt superior and critical. Even when I knew the seriousness of everything, watching that leaf vanish into great blackness overhead...out of the thermal now, gliding off in some preplanned direction, no doubt...even then I felt remarkably unafraid, knowing that that leaf would surely reach the canopy somewhere, igniting hundreds of leaves

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and the sappy young branches...and part of me wanted nothing more than to take my student aside, arm around her shoulders, while I said, "Now listen. This is all very clever, and I'm sure it's cruel, but this is neither elegant nor artful and show me another way to do it. By tomorrow. That's your assignment, Ula. Will you do it for me, please?"

The forest caught fire.

I heard the fire before I saw the ruddy glow of it. It sounded like a grinding wind, strong and coming nearer; then came the crashing of softened ice, blocks and slush dropping onto my fire and choking it out completely.

I didn't have time or the concentration to build another fire

Towering red flames were streaking through the cavern, first in the canopy and then lower, igniting whole trunks that would explode. I heard them, and I felt the detonations against my face and through my toes. The air itself began to change, tasting warm and sooty, ashes against my teeth and tongue. Transfixed, I stood in the clearing beside the pond, thick and twisting black columns of smoke rising, the ceiling lit red and the smoke pooling against it, forming an inverted lake full of swirling superheated gases.

Over the rumble and roar of the fire, I heard someone speaking, close and harsh...and after a few moments of hard concentration I realized it was my voice, senseless angry sounds bubbling out of me...and I clamped a hand over my mouth, fingers into a cheek and tears mixed with the stinking ash...I was crying...I had been crying for a very long while....

I would die here.

Always crying, I struggled with prosaic calculations. Calories from combustion; oxygen consumed; the relative toughness of human flesh. But my numbers collapsed, too much stress and too little time remaining. Part of the firestorm was coming back at me now, trunks burning and splitting open as the fiery sap boiled; but I wouldn't burn to death, I decided. Because what felt like a finger struck me on top of my head, in my hair, and I looked up just as a second gooey drop of water found me. It dripped between the fingers of my clamping hand, and I tasted it — smoke and ash mixed with a sharp, almost chemical aftertaste —

— melted ice from the faraway roof —

— unfrozen, ancient seawater.

The black lake of churning smoke was its deepest straight above me, and

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those first drops became multitudes, fat and forceful. Like rain, then harder. They hammered me to the ground, my head dropping and my hands held above it, shielding very little, and squinting eyes able to see the oncoming fire begin to slow, to drown.

I thought of the falls melting with this onslaught, but I couldn't stand, much less move. The mud under me seemed to suck, holding me in place. I was squarely beneath an enormous waterfall — no cliché — and I would have laughed, given the breath.

Funny, fun Ula.

Perhaps the largest waterfall in the Realm, I was thinking. For this moment, at least. And my mind's eye lent me a safe vantage point, flames and water struggling for the world. And destroying it too. And somewhere I realized that by now I had to be dead, that breathing had to be impossible, that I only believed I was breathing because death had to be a continuation of life, a set of habits maintained. What a lovely, even charming wonder. I felt quite calm, quite happy. Hearing the roar of water, aware of the soil and trees and rock itself being obliterated...my bones and pulverized meat mixed into the stew...and how sweet that I could retain my limbs, my face and mouth and heart, as a ghost. I thought. Touching myself in the noisy blackness, I found even my soaked jersey intact...no, not total blackness; there was a dim glow from above...and I began to sit upright, thinking like a ghost, wondering about my powers and wishing that my soul could lift now, lift and fly away.

But instead, with unghostly force, my head struck a solid surface.

Thunk.

I staggered, groaned, and reached out with both hands, discovering a blister of transparent hyperglass above me. Enclosing me. Larger than a coffin, but not by much...it must have been deployed at the last possible instant, air pumped in from below, seals designed to withstand this abuse...a safety mechanism not shown on any schematic, obviously...and I was alive, slippery wet and numb but undeniably organic....

...and unalone as well.

Rising from the mud beside me, visible in that thin cool light, was a naked form — artist; torturer; Nature Herself — who calmly and with great dignity wiped the mud from her eyes and grinning mouth. And she bent, the mouth to my ear, asking me over the great roar, "So what have you learned today, student?"

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I couldn't speak, could barely think.

Opening my jersey, she kissed my bare chest. "The eight-legged howler was just noise. Just my little illusion."

Yet in my head it was real, even now.

"I would never intentionally hurt," she promised. "Not you, not anyone."

I wanted to believe her.

"I always watched over you, Hann. I never blinked."

Thank you.

"I'm not cruel." A pause. "It's just — "

Yes?

" — I wanted to show you — "

What?

" — what? What have I shown you, darling?"

Squinting, I gazed up through the thick blister, the black water churning more slowly, cooling and calming itself. My mind became lucid, answers forming and my mouth opening and her anticipating the moment, her hand tasting of earth as it closed my mouth again.

WE LAY QUIETLY together, as if in a common grave. For two days we waited, the water refreezing around us and neither of us speaking, the creaking of new ice fading into a perfect silence. A contemplative, enlightening silence. I built worlds in my head — great and beautiful and true, full of the frailties and powers of life — then came the gnawing and pounding of robots. Half-burned trees were jerked free and tossed aside. The ice itself was peeled away from the blister. I saw motions, then stars. Then a familiar stocky figure. Provo Lei peered in at us, the round face furious and elated in equal measures; and as he began to cut us free, in those last moments of solitude, I turned to Ula and finally spoke.

"You never wanted to terraform worlds," I blurted.

"Worlds are tiny," she said with contempt. Her liquid smile was lit by the cutting laser, and a green eye winked as she said, "Tell me, Hann. What do I care about?"

Something larger than worlds, I knew —

— and I understood, in an instant —

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— but as I touched my head, ready to tell, Provo burst through the hyperglass and stole my chance. Suddenly Ula had changed, becoming the pouting little girl, her lower lip stuck out and a plaintive voice crying, "Oh, Father. I'm such a clumsy goof, Father. I'm sorry, so sorry. Will you ever forgive me? Please, please?"

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Pencil Me In

I FIRST WENT online fifteen years ago.

To put this statement into perspective: at the time, if you wanted a home computer, you had to build it yourself. A "desktop" was where you rested your in-basket, a "laptop" was where your cat sat, and "palmtop" was a bizarre oxymoron. Bill Gibson was writing the first draft of "Johnny Mnemonic" with a quill pen, and *Wired* magazine was called *Telegraph Monthly*.

The portion of the Net that I logged onto daily was an isolated swamp. In terms of abilities and options, it resembled an anencephalic infant. If cyberspace has neighborhoods, this was Federal housing on the wrong side of the tracks, next to a radioactive landfill.

Two IBM 370 mainframes sat in the basement of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Rhode Island, my employer. They supported a hundred or so dumb terminals scattered over three buildings, along with *punched-card readers* and *magnetic tape drives* (see Glossary).

But we had E-mail, of a primitive sort. Messages could be sent. Files could be shared. Stunning graphics composed of keyboard characters arrayed in matrices — like that visual poetry you fooled with in high school — could be created and admired. In other words, we had all the functions of the modern-day Net in rudimentary form, except perhaps for viruses, sky-high phone bills and scanned *Penthouse* centerfolds.

And how did people use this wonderful resource? Mostly, the E-mail consisted of messages from Tech Support asking us overworked programmers why we didn't delete those files we hadn't accessed in a year, and thus free up precious disk space? Or perhaps there'd be an exhortation from Management to buckle down and meet those coding goals, or maybe a paean to the latest rate increase.

Granted, it was a work environment, so most of the communications pertained to less-than-stimu-

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lating topics. But the personal messages were hardly more edifying. They consisted mostly of gossip about who was sleeping with whom, comments about clothing, personal grooming habits, and what the company cafeteria was serving for lunch.

In other words, exactly what I and my co-workers would have yakked about had they actually gotten up from their veal-fattening pens and walked a few carpeted yards over to mine. The only thing missing from the experience was halitosis, dandruff, and doughnut crumbs. But you got that at coffee-break.

This experience, I fear, has forever soured my opinion of the Net and what it offers. And nothing I've seen since of the new whiz-bang version has really changed my mind.

Cyberspace is filled with humans. Like any medium, it will contain precisely what is put into it. And what most people seem to be interested in is — you guessed it.

Which BBS sysop is sleeping with whom, comments about clothing, personal grooming habits, and what the MUD cafeteria is serving for lunch. And if smileys aren't that same old damn concrete poetry, then I'm George Herbert, the Metaphysical Mystic.

The handy phrase from computing's early days — "Garbage In, Garbage Out" — appears to have been forgotten lately, but GIGO could easily become the Burma-Shave sign along the Information Highway.

Still, despite all this, I had been feeling rather like a guilty Luddite these days in regard to the virtues of the much-ballyhooed Net. Until I read recently that a support group (how Nineties!) now exists for the digitally impaired.

Called the Lead Pencil Club, it was founded by Bill Henderson, who heads the Pushcart Press. Solidly against E-mail, faxes, and voice-mail, among other things, they portray themselves as "a pothole on the information highway." They are in favor of any kind of "direct human contact," and may be reached at P.O. Box 380, Wainscott, NY 11975.

Now, don't get me wrong. I couldn't live without my computer and its word-processing capabilities. Like the old NRA slogan, the only way you'll get my trusty Commodore away from me is to pry it out of my dead hands. But I do tend to value old-fashioned direct human contact more highly than its optic-fiber-mediated equivalent.

In that spirit, let me recommend the top ten alternatives to dialing up "Spock's Adventure BBS" for the twentieth time this week.

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10. VISIT THE DENTIST

The classic one-on-one human experience.

9. GO TO A CON

The classic many-on-one human (?) experience.

8. HAVE A DRINK IN A BAR

Can you actually imagine that *Cheers* would have been such a hit if it was set in cyberspace? And just imagine how many megs it would have taken to hold Norm.

7. RIDE YOUR BIKE

Hey, real trees look just like fractals!

6. CREATE SOME MAIL ART

Have you ever received an envelope stuffed with feathers, Cracker Jack trinkets and nail clippings, and decorated with crayoned obscenities over the Net?

5. SWIM IN THE OCEAN

No start-up charges!

4. PLAY/LISTEN TO LIVE MUSIC

Virtual-reality engineers are approximately two decades away from simulating the ambiance of your typical club. Just the aroma of spilled beer and overflowing lavatories alone is costing millions to duplicate.

3. GO TO THE MOVIES WITH SOMEONE OF A DESIRABLE GENDER

No explanation necessary.

2. COME HOME FOR COFFEE AFTERWARD

Ditto.

1. THE REST IS UP TO YOU

Likewise.

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IS THE INVISIBLE MAN PSYCHOTIC?

OR HAS THE PSYCHIATRIST DELUSIONS THAT HE HAS THE INVISIBLE MAN FOR A PATIENT?

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Artist Jill Bauman based her delightful cover on "El Hijo de Hernez." Marcos Donnelly's work has always had an original view of the world, but in this — a science fiction fantasy about an all-too plausible future — he has outdone himself.

Marcos's most recent story for F&SF *was "Bloodletting" in our June issue. His first sale to us was reprinted in* The Best From Fantasy and Science Fiction *(published by St. Martin's Press). His stories have also appeared in Bantam Books' award-winning* Full Spectrum *series.*

El Hijo de Hernez

By Marcos Donnelly

"His fingers, they noticed, were
ever straying,
As if impatient to be playing..."
—Robert Browning

THE NEIGHBORHOOD'S north boundary was East 82nd Street. When I was growing up, I'd watch the black kids play basketball there, on the pavement inside the eight-foot fence around Saint Malachy's church and Catholic school. The priests left the gate unlocked from sun-up to dinner time. There was never any trouble there, no drugs, no blades or guns, no gang members showing colors. Not on the church grounds. The priests just figured there'd be no trouble, and there wasn't.

I saw Saint Malachy's in the newspaper last week. I think I did. One of those helicopter photos, and not a real high-up picture like the ones the LAPD helicopters take. It was low, a *Times* shot. The crazy-mother journalists feel

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it's their life duty to keep taking those pictures. If you ask me, the cops got the right idea: stay high, real high.

The photo showed seven towers on what used to be the Saint Malachy's grounds. You could make out the pole for the basketball hoop, still there west of the rectory. Three of the towers looked finished already, sprouting out of the skeleton frame of the church like accidental steeples. They're like the hundred or so other towers around the old neighborhood: tall, rungy, like concrete spider webs pulled from the middle on up toward the sky, and decorated with dishes, stop signs, soda cans. Other bizarre stuff.

Bizarre stuff...the stuff you mention last. Like the tower at the corner of 10th and Compton, made up all of skulls. That one's forty-five feet high. And the one at Imperial and Avalon, the one called *Las Muñecas*. Dolls, hundreds and thousands of them, cemented into the pipe and chicken-wired struts — stuffed dolls, rag dolls, china dolls, Cabbage Patch dolls, and every race, shade, color and creed of plastic Barbies.

I don't know, of course, but I like to think that Mr. Pietr had my brother Luis help build that one, the tower *Las Muñecas*. That would be fitting. That would have made Mama proud.

I still hear him sometimes. Not my brother Luis, but Mr. Pietr. And not just at night, either.

"José," he says. "José, come build the city." And there's the music, the sweet, sweet, goddamn music behind his words. And the only thing holding me back is remembering I don't call myself José. *Me llamo Joey. Eso es, sí que es.*

The Save-Our-Cities lady started shouting at the man from the LA Mayor's office. Mama was up there on stage behind them, and I saw her pinch the bridge of her nose. She picked that up from television; one night she'd pointed it out to me, how tense people on TV always pinched their noses, and after that she always did it, too. A few of our neighborhood leaders, also sitting on stage, noticed her pinching, and two of them mimicked her. I don't think they realized why they were doing it.

Mama had that sort of influence.

"Millions of dollars are pumped into areas like Beverly Hills, Park La Brea, and West Hollywood, while this community rots of neglect!" The Save-Our-Cities lady was a white woman with stringy red hair and a baggy T-shirt.

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Besides Mr. Pietr, my seventh-grade teacher, she was the only white person in St. Malachy's community hall. It was hot, and the hall was way too small for the hundred or so of us packed in there. A couple of ceiling fans turned slow enough that I could count the separate blades; they spun useless and lazy, twisting the heat around for us.

"Los Angeles County and the federal government have invested heavily in this area." The man from the Mayor's office talked quieter than the lady. "My participation here tonight is evidence of our interest in your anti-drug efforts. Grass-roots movements like these encourage us to continue our investments." He was a black man, and even at thirteen I could imagine the conversation downtown. "Fringe of the Watts area," some white politician would have said. "Better send a Black or a Mexican. We got any free?"

I didn't want to be there that night, but Mr. Pietr told us it might be a good idea. He said we should show our support for the South Central Drug-Free Zone effort. The way Mr. Pietr said it meant he might not play the pipe for the class if we didn't show up. *Everybody* from my seventh grade class was there.

"Invest!" The Save-Our-Cities lady had a shriek like a bus braking on a wet day. "You call the Watts Shopping Center an *investment*? How many people here in this hall do you think can actually afford to shop there? You have no idea, do you?"

I wondered if *she* had any idea. Father Galloway, the pastor of St. Malachy's, had brought the woman in as a guest speaker for the meeting. I'd never seen her before, and she'd probably never be back. Not to shop, not to live here, not for nothing.

People from the crowd started yelling out their own opinions, but the Mayor's man stayed calm. "Since 1990, nearly fifty million dollars have been invested in the Fifteenth District and surrounding areas. We've used HUD allocations to create seven immense housing projects, two additional senior citizen centers for..."

He hesitated because the audience shut up, all at once. He saw why when he looked to his left, our right: Mama had stood. Father Galloway, with skin like nighttime and a permanent face of worry, stepped in front of the Save-Our-Cities lady to talk through her microphone. "If we could yield the floor for a moment, I believe La Viuda de Hernez has a comment to make." Most everybody still called Mama that, "the Widow of Hernez," even though it was

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five years since my father got killed down on Imperial. Mama liked being called La Viuda.

She didn't use the microphone. "Fifty million dollars since 1990. That would be eight years. Mr. Pietr, how many people would you say live in the Fifteenth District?"

All our heads turned to find Mr. Pietr. He wasn't hard to spot, tall, lanky, and paler than any Anglo I'd ever seen. Mr. Pietr stood to answer, the way he made us do in class. "I would guess around forty thousand, Señora." He said *señora* funny, all swallowed and white-like.

"That seems to be an arithmetic problem, doesn't it?" Mama said. "I wonder how much that would be just for me, just for one day."

More movement in the audience — Zane Gerard, Lucinda Ramirez, Tyque Raymond, everybody else from my class shifting all nervous because they knew what was coming. Mr. Pietr looked around until he found the first student who hadn't disappeared in a slouch.

"José Hernez," he said.

I hated when people called me José.

I stood.

"Could you solve that problem for us?"

I caught the Mayor's man rolling his eyes. The Save-Our-Cities lady looked distracted, maybe a little confused that she was no longer the center of attention. Mama had a smile, tight and proper.

I closed my eyes and listened for it. I could remember the exact tune, the pipe song for math class. I could see Mr. Pietr playing, I could feel the breeze blowing numbers all around me, and I saw the right numbers lining up and behaving themselves for me when I told them to. Fifty million dollars was divided by eight years, which was split for forty thousand people in the Fifteenth District, and a portion I gave to my mother who I saw bubble apart into three hundred and sixty-five days, all in a rectangle of seventy-three rows by five columns, which was the only way I could make them float neatly. I reached out, took one bubble, and read it.

I opened my eyes. "Forty-two cents, plus eighty-one one hundredths of a penny if you round up." I checked over to Zane Gerard. He was nodding at me. I knew that even though it wasn't his math problem, he couldn't resist working it, too. None of us wanted to resist. Behind Zane Gerard, Tyque Raymond was thumb-upping me.

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"Course, I didn't count leap years," I said. The man from the Mayor's office didn't seem to know what to say to that. I watched Mama digging through her big wicker purse. She pulled out two quarters, walked over to the Mayor's man, and pressed them into his palm. "You can have today's investment back. You haven't done anything for me today."

That broke the crowd's quiet. People hooted, yelled insults, even tossed quarters, dimes, and pennies up on stage at the man's feet. The seventh grade class of Saint Malachy's school sat still, doing nothing, shouting nothing, tossing nothing. I glanced at Zane, at Tyque, at Lucinda, Marialuz, Jamal, Manuel, Bobby, Tamara. They were all remembering it, just like me: the pipe song for quiet, for staying calm and not joining in trouble. I looked back toward Mr. Pietr; the fingers of his right hand tapped restless on his left forearm, like he was anxious, real anxious, to play.

The meeting broke up. Mama, the Save-Our-Cities lady, and Mr. Pietr talked together on stage in a tight huddle, while Father Galloway hurried all anxious through the crowd, blessing everybody and wishing them goodnight. Me and Zane and Tyque stood by the hall doors. Zane had his arms crossed and looked mean. Tyque jittered and bounced on his toes. Tyque was always touching things — walls, light switches, people's arms, like if he didn't keep some contact going he might zoom away off the face of the Earth.

When most everybody was blessed and leaving, Zane asked, "We going out?"

"Gotta tell La Viuda."

"He's gonna tell La Viuda first," Tyque told Zane. Zane smirked.

Before I could walk over to the stage, the Mayor's man stepped in front of us. This close, he was a hell of a lot bigger. I didn't know he'd stayed around. He was all by himself, no huddles like Mama's and no blessings from Father Galloway. "Hello, boys," he said.

"Yuh," said Zane.

"I'm Mr. Curtis."

Tyque jiggled in his direction. "Hi, Mr. Curtis."

"Are the three of you friends?"

Zane scowled, and I thought it was a stupid question, too. "Yuh," Zane snapped, "'cause we sure as hell ain't blood."

We laughed, and even Zane smiled. Tyque pounded my shoulder four or

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five times. "We bad, we beat, but we ain't blood! We bad, we beat, but we ain't blood!"

Our motto.

Nothing frazzled the Mayor's man. "Dr. Martin Luther King dreamed of a day when children of different races would play together and live side by side — " The man was playing teacher.

"'That one day on the red hills of Georgia,'" said Zane, and Tyque hummed the pipe tune for history class, "'they'll all sit down together at the table of brotherhood. That my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.'" Zane recited it real good, with lots of emotion, even though most of the emotion was sarcasm.

"You think Georgia's *all* red?" Tyque asked, really sounding like he wanted to know.

As quick as he'd stepped up, the Mayor's man walked away. I got still, because I could *feel* him leave. A pipe tune played in my head, going after him. I'd never heard the tune before, but it echoed lonelier than any Mr. Pietr had ever played. I looked at Zane and Tyque, but I don't think they were paying attention to Mr. Curtis's tune.

"Go talk at La Viuda," Zane said.

More people were in Mama's huddle now, and she was at the center of it all. She didn't need to say nothing much to be the center. Her every small comment was holy word-of-God.

"It's a war," the Save-Our-Cities lady explained. "Until we see it's a war, there'll be no mobilized effort. There'll be no victories in our cities." She was begging Mr. Pietr to believe her.

Mr. Pietr's voice was smooth and soft. "Saving cities is too hard. I don't try anymore." He kept glancing down at the floor when he talked. With old people, he wasn't so forceful as when he was in our classroom. "It's a lot easier to save individuals."

"That's where it starts!" the Save-Our-Cities lady said, sounding like she and Mr. Pietr had just agreed on the most important thing ever.

Mama saw me standing there. "*Ven acá, m'hijo.*"

I waved her to me instead. They parted for her, and we stepped away.

"I'm going out."

The power of La Viuda faded away all at once. She had her back to the

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others, but I could see the weak woman under all the respect that they put on her. That they *invested* in her. My brother Luis was the first one to figure out how to make Mama weak, how to make the face of La Viuda disappear. He was good at it. After he took off from home — early last year, just not showing up one night, just running off and leaving me behind without even telling me he was going to — I had to learn for myself how to weaken La Viuda.

I didn't know why Luis never told me he was taking off. I still don't know why. Mama didn't argue. She never did anymore, not with me. "*Cuídate, hijo.*"

"Yuh," I said. "I'll be late."

She took a moment to put a proper face back on. Behind me as I left, I heard her speak to the Save-Our-Cities lady. "You're a very nice girl," she said, and I knew at that second the lady was transformed into a Very Nice Girl, on La Viuda's say-so.

MR. PIETR JUST showed up one day. It was six months earlier, the middle of November. We were getting into the classroom on a Monday morning, waiting for our teacher, Miss Lincoln. In walked Mr. Pietr instead. We got quiet, wondering who the heck he was. He dropped a stack of books on Miss Lincoln's desk, and he stared at us for the longest time without saying a word. He was smiling.

"Miss Lincoln has taken a job with the public school district. I'm your new teacher, Mr. Pietr."

He started right in taking attendance, which wasn't the right order. Prayers and the pledge of allegiance were supposed to come before attendance. Nobody corrected him, though. We'd never seen any white teachers at Saint Malachy's, and we'd never had a man for a teacher.

When he called off my name for attendance, he said "José Hernez." I just said, "Here," and nothing else.

After attendance, he had us take out our Number Seven Readers for silent storytime. That was it — no rules for the classroom, no long talks on behavior, not even directions on what page we should turn to in the readers. I opened mine to the middle of a story about the circus, and I started sounding out words. I never read as fast as everybody else in the class. Zane and Tyque could get through a whole story faster than I could read two pages.

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That was the first time we heard one of his pipe tunes. While we read, he pulled out a long, silver pipe and started playing on it. A few of us laughed — stupid white guy with a stupid pipe thing making a damn fool of himself.

But then the music started doing something in my head. Mr. Pietr stopped long enough to tell us, "Keep reading," and when I did, the words on the page looked different. Bigger. I could see them in whole chunks, and I didn't have to sound them out letter by letter. I read smooth and fast, past words like "Ferris wheel" and "interesting" and "entertainment," without having to sound them out.

The pipe music did something else, too. It made my stomach feel comfortable and full, and my mouth had a chocolate taste like a KitKat bar. While I read, I tasted it even more. I *wanted* to read, faster and faster, and I remembered everything I read.

That was the first tune, the Reading Song. We begged him to play songs for other things — spelling, math, vocabulary, history, religion. He did. We memorized all the songs. We hummed them to each other even after school was over for the day.

And we started getting A's in all our classes.

I loved going out after the sun was down. I don't think it was the way the streets looked at night; it was how they smelled and how they felt and how they sounded — car horns far off, and, somewhere you couldn't see, some guy screaming at his girl or a muffled crack that might have been a door breaking, might have been a gun. When night was hot, it sat in your ears and pressed on your brain. The streets right around you were always quiet, the noise was always someplace else far off. The quiet gave night its edge. When you couldn't see other people anywhere, it was scariest. That's when it was best.

In the year before he left, my brother Luis sometimes let me go around with him and his friends at night. Luis was the first one ever to call me Joey instead of José, and I liked it so much that he made everybody else call me Joey, too, starting with his night friends.

There were other nights, though, that Luis wouldn't let me come out with them — the nights where they were doing something like drugs or shit, or nights they were gonna cause trouble over by Compton. Luis didn't want me there because he didn't want his little brother to get fucked up in any way. I never told him that his little brother didn't want him getting fucked up, neither.

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I should have told him that. Now I went around the streets with Tyque and Zane. "We live in the *ghetto*," Tyque said, like nobody knew this. It meant more than that, of course. Tyque and his Mom came from New York, where Tyque said ghettos were built different. "This ghetto got *lawns*," he'd always say. I tried to picture a New York ghetto, imagining pretty much our streets except with yards all flat, hard dirt. It didn't seem much different. Just taller buildings, was all.

We walked the side streets, heading south toward the one-hundred numbers just to convince ourselves that we were bad, that we could beat. We talked a lot of shit in whispers, like wondering whether Jamal was really fucking Tashina, and whether Marialuz would *ever* do it with *anybody*. We walked the darker side of the streets ("We bad!") and jumped behind palm trunks or front-yard bushes whenever a car drove by ("We *so* bad!").

About midnight, we were as far as 103rd, near Alameda and up from Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. Tyque pointed down that way and laughed. "Are the three of you friends?" he asked in a deep voice, and he laughed even more, like it was hilarious or something. Near a place called the Myers Furniture Shop, Zane waved us into an alley. A few feet in, we had to jump a couple rusted shopping carts that blocked the way. It got dark halfway down the alley, but cars passed the Alameda side, their lights reflecting off the barred windows of Myers and letting us see clear every now and then. The far side of the alley opened on a quieter street—maybe Tweedy, I didn't know, we'd never come this far down.

"Tyque," Zane said all quiet and intense. "I need you to hold for me."

"Yeah, Zane," Tyque said, and then he said, "Huh?"

"To hold for me. Some stuff." Zane held out a bottle as thin as a pencil, about as long as your middle finger. My stomach went twisted and I swore out loud.

"What that?" Tyque stopped smiling for the first time that night. "What the hell, Zane, what you got? Jesus, Zane, Jesus."

"It's my Dad's. He'll be tearing up the house finding it, so you gotta hold for me for a while."

Nobody said nothing. Zane kept holding it out. Tyque jittered and jerked without a sound. Public school kids passed drugs. Saint Malachy's kids never did, or, if they did, they weren't around Saint Malachy's for long. Stupid Zane, Zane-Insane.

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Drugs made people like my brother Luis run away, without ever saying goodbye to me or telling me where he was off to.

"Don't do this shit, Zane." Tyque stared at the bottle like it was gonna explode. "That'll kill you dead, man. You know so, you know they say so on TV and at school."

"Shit, just like you, Tyque! Ain't it just like you to believe every word you ever hear said!" Zane looked insulted, but his eyes were wide. "I ain't gonna touch it, Tyque. Gonna sell it."

"What for, man?" I said, without letting my voice shake.

"For money, what the hell you think? My Dad will strip me down looking, so Tyque gotta hold."

Tyque looked scared as all shit. He reached forward a little, his hand completely still.

"It's just till my Dad give up looking."

Tyque took it. I didn't say nothing.

A bottle broke loud, down the alley toward the street I didn't know. The three of us scampered over the shopping carts and crouched.

Four black men; two were in colors. They were shouting faster than I could understand, but one of the colors had a broken bottle in his hand. The two without jackets backed into the alley toward us. We ducked lower.

"You ripped us, skin. You ripped us, so you fucking pay."

"No money, blood! I swear to God we pay tomorrow night! You know we pay, we always pay!"

"Yeah, you fucking pay whenever we move to cut your wasted asses. Tired of it, *blood*."

There was the sound of another bottle breaking, and then scuffling, and smothered grunts, and endless swearing too fast to take in.

And then music. Pipe melody. The sound was almost like the heat, pressing in on my ears, but not quite forcing its way into my brain. It even smelled, like a burning cigarette with a little cinnamon toast behind it on the morning after...after something I couldn't recognize.

I looked. His outline at the alley's end was bright without lights. Dressed real crazy, *real* crazy. His clothes were fifteen, sixteen colors wild, red, greens, yellows, blues, more, all glowing, and there was a scarf blowing from his neck without any wind to keep it whipping out that way. I swear to God, his eyes burned. They burned.

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It was the ugliest music I'd ever heard in my whole life. The four black men stopped fighting and stared at him. For a second, I thought, We're gonna have to fight. We gotta save Mr. Pietr's ass, crazy-mother white guy busting in like this. It was four against four if Mr. Pietr punched, too, but we were *small*. We were *little*.

All the broken bottles dropped. The four guys' eyes went empty, staring nowhere. They grinned, all stupid.

We bad.

They shuffled toward Mr. Pietr; the awful music was making them walk toward it, even though it wasn't doing nothing to me. Funny, because I thought the music worked the same for everybody all the time, but I just heard the music ugly.

I saw Tyque climbing the shopping carts. Same dumb eyes, same maniac grin.

Zane grabbed him. "Mother, stay *here*!" But Zane couldn't hold on to him. Tyque hears it different, I thought. Jesus, Tyque hears it like they do. I jumped him hard and knocked him down. Zane hugged his waist, I held his shoulders.

Tyque stood up. We dangled from him. He walked after Mr. Pietr and the others.

"Hum!" Zane screamed at me. "Hum the one where you don't join in!" We hummed, the pipe song for calm. I didn't hum too good, but Zane was better, louder. Tyque slowed and started looking confused. But he didn't stop. Zane was crying, something I'd never seen, and he held Tyque for anything, beating on him to stop him. Then Zane reached down into Tyque's pocket and pulled out the pencil-thin bottle.

Tyque collapsed under our weight.

Drugs, I thought. *DrugSong drugs drugdrugdrug*... We could still hear the pipe music, down the street somewhere. Zane's face began to twist up screwy. I moved, I didn't even think. I kicked his arm, and the bottle flew out of his hand. It smashed on the brick alley wall of Myers Furniture Shop, left a white powder stain and a quick cloud.

Quiet, then, except for our breathing. Tyque smiled again, his real smile, not the crazy face. "Music," he said. "Think the Vocabulary Song, you guys."

Zane was still crying. "I'm sorry, Tyque. I'm so sorry, man."

"*Do* it! Think the Vocabulary Song." Tyque never ordered us for nothing, so we tried. We listened for the Vocabulary Song.

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"Lots and lots of colors. The way Mr. Pietr looked. Colors everywhere."

"Variegated," I said.

"Spectral," said Zane.

"Pied."

Zane and I looked at each other. Pied was the right word. "Jesus," Tyque said. "I would follow that music anywhere." Zane scowled, but he nodded, real slow.

I am Joey Hernez, the son of the widow Rosario Santón de Hernez and of the dead Joaquín Hernez who got killed on Imperial Avenue in 1993. My family is very large. We live in Los Angeles. In the house lives my mother and my three older sisters María, Carolina, and Rosalinda. My older brother Luis does not live in the house no more. He is gone a year now and he does not call. In the back yard we have three trailers where lives my uncle Jesús and his boy Paquito in one. They are waiting to make money so they can send for my aunt in Mexico and the smaller children. In the second trailer lives the family of my aunts people who are not our family. They are seven in that trailer, they would have been ten except that three died in crossing the desert to the north river in a van. The last trailer has my grandmother who does not talk English like me. She has the whole trailer herself and she is an ancient. She never talks to no one. She eats lonely. We are all Catholics and I go to Saint Malachys school for seventh grade. I use to go to public school but it is a bad thing there. My brother Luis went there. My sisters two of them go to Verbum Dei on a bus, which is another Catholic school but for high school. My other sister is embarrassed and stays home. I have black hair. Zane Gerard is my best friend and so is Tyque Raymond. I think being from Mexico is stupid.

"It's a little short," Mr. Pietr told me. "The essay was for three hundred words."

I didn't say nothing. Everybody in the class was working in math groups, but I felt like they were staring at me while I stood up there at Mr. Pietr's desk getting graded. I didn't look at him. I kept thinking he might turn all pied.

"Some other problems. You've got to learn to paragraph, José. Your handwriting and spelling are excellent, but if you don't use paragraphs your

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reader will get too tired. Also, look here." He circled a line about my grandmother. "What's wrong with this?"

She never talks to no one. 'Nunca habla a nadie.' 'Nunca habla con *nadie'*? "She never talks with nobody."

He laughed at me. "It's a double negative, José. You can't use 'never' and 'no one' in the same phrase. Didn't you think the Writing Song while you did this?"

My face prickled up all hot. I had things wrong because I'd thought the Mexican words when I was writing. And I wrote it without the music. I was afraid to think any pipe music, ever since that night with the Drug Song.

Still, I was pretty sure Zane would say, "She never talks with no one," or at least, "She don't talk to nobody."

"This part isn't clear," Mr. Pietr said. "Why is your sister too embarrassed to go to school?"

My head felt fuzzy. "You don't go to school like that. All fat and with people talking."

"Your sister's fat, so she's too embarrassed to go to school?"

"No! I...you know, it's that she got embarrassed, then fat, see?"

Mr. Pietr didn't see. I must have had the words wrong again. I could have thought the Vocabulary Song, but I didn't want to. "She's embarrassed. Having a baby." *Embarazada.*

I heard music for laughing. Laughing wasn't a pipe tune Mr. Pietr had ever played for us, but I could tell it was one of his songs, just the same, coming from him right now. It was playing in the back of my head, even though Mr. Pietr's face didn't show nothing even like a smile. "Stop it," I said.

He frowned. "Stop what?"

"Laughing at me. Laughing at me because I'm a stupid Mexican."

His eyebrows scrunched up, and the tune I could hear in my head switched to another melody he'd never played. It was a song for lining up thoughts when you're confused.

"Why are you so angry, José?" He really didn't know. He didn't understand.

"I wanna get the words right. Not just when I make your stupid essays, but when I talk, too. I wanna get them right, *but without the fucking music*!"

The class got all quiet because of my yelling. Mr. Pietr was quiet, too, and in a whisper he said, "Don't ever use that kind of language with me."

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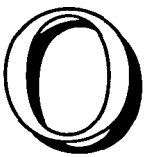
The whisper didn't fool me. I could hear the music he wanted to play. It was very, very sad music, and had some pain, like I'd just kicked him real hard.



UR HOUSE was filled with dolls. When Mama was a young woman...long before she was La Viuda, even before she was Mama...she worked in a factory that made dolls. She said the factory was right down in Watts, although I couldn't think what use so many dolls could be in a neighborhood like ours.

Mr. Pietr was walking around our living room, studying the dolls while he waited for dinner. In the kitchen, Mama was frying tortillas while Carolina got the beans ready and Maria set the table. Rosalinda was hiding in her room. She didn't want Mr. Pietr, or anybody outside the family, to see that she was pregnant.

Pregnant. That was the right word for *embarazada.* I looked it up myself. It was about two weeks since I didn't know it for my essay, which made two weeks since I'd said a single word in class to Mr. Pietr, and which also made two weeks since I'd gone out at night with Tyque and Zane. They were always whispering now, and when I walked up they would stop whispering. They would say the normal things to me, like, "Yuh," and "We bad, but we ain't blood," but they were different, and getting a little more different every day. Zane smiled a lot more than he used to. Tyque didn't smile quite so much.

Mama took one tortilla out of the oil and put it in the warmer plate. She started patting out another one to cook. She was trying hard to ignore me.

"*Why*, Mama? Why did you invite him to dinner? I already gotta see him all day at school!"

"*Cálmate, hijo.*" The hot oil sizzled when she put in the next tortilla. Some of the oil splattered on my arm, little pinpricks on my skin, but I didn't move or show that I felt it.

"Well, why didn't you even *tell* me? Why not, Mama?"

She didn't answer. Tortilla after tortilla, she ignored me, and then kept right on ignoring me through cutting up vegetables for the colache and frying the chorizos in vinegar and brandy. She hummed to herself, but the tune she hummed was some mariachi song she liked. It didn't have any meaning or power. It was just an empty tune for shutting me out.

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In school for the last two weeks, I'd learned that I could shut out Mr. Pietr's music. I made up my own tunes; for Pietr's math tune, I made up a song I called "No Math For Me." For the Social Studies pipe melody, I thought up a tune I named "I Ain't Nobody, I Ain't Nowhere, I Ain't Nothing, So There." And then I would study on my own. My test grades got a lot lower, but I wasn't flunking. And they were *my* grades, *mine.*

"Why, Mama?"

No answer.

"Mama, *why*?"

She started cooking up more tortillas now, and began to stack them between the ones she'd cooked twenty minutes ago. It was a trick of hers for big dinners. She'd cook the first ones early, the first half of them, and then she'd cook the rest right before serving and place them between the others: a cold, a hot, a cold, a hot, and so on until they were all done, and the hot ones would cool off onto the cold ones, leaving all of them warm for dinner.

I couldn't figure why she was making so many until the doorbell rang and up showed Father Galloway, the Save-Our-Cities lady, and Mr. Curtis, the black man from the Mayor's office. La Viuda was throwing a whole damned party.

I just ate and didn't say nothing. Didn't say *anything.* My sisters didn't say anything either, so it was just the adults talking and being overly polite to one another, like there was more to be said than what fund drive the church was having, what social activism groups the Save-Our-Cities lady was involved in, what the next LA County initiatives might be, and what sort of stuff Mr. Pietr was teaching right now in the seventh grade.

It got funny, then. Talking about what Mr. Pietr was teaching made them all feel funny. I pretended to be busy pouring myself some more Pepsi, but I started trying to listen to their tunes, the background music that hung behind everybody there. I gave the tunes names as I listened to them. The Mayor's man had a tune I called, "This Is Crazy, Why Did I Come Here?" My sister Carolina's was, "What Should I Wear, Oh, Tomorrow, Tomorrow, What Should I Wear?" Not very interesting music. Mama had a strange tune I couldn't follow, but I could feel enough of it to call it "Oh, My Babies, My Poor Dolls."

And Mr. Pietr's was strongest of all. His tune was "Change The Subject."

Mr. Pietr changed the subject.

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"Speaking of school, I got a very nice essay from José two weeks ago. It was all about his family."

The bastard. He wouldn't let me stay invisible. "Really, José!" The Save-Our-Cities lady leaned forward at me, acting like she was all interested, but I could hear her tune switch from a song called "Can We Save The World?" to a lush, perfumy melody I called, "Does Mr. Pietr Notice Me?"

"Yuh," I said.

"And what did you write about your family?"

I couldn't concentrate, because the song from the Save-Our-Cities lady was getting louder and louder in my head. What would Zane say right now? Probably something like, "That bitch be hot!" She was. She was hot for Mr. Pietr, and that threw me. I got all nervous and stared down at my plate. If I talked, I would have stuttered.

Mr. Pietr saved me from the stutter. "José's essay was very nice. He wrote about La Viuda, and about his father and his grandmother, and a lot of his other relatives."

Thank you, Mr. Pietr. Very much. For saving me.

"And what did you write?" Mama asked. She said it all proper, using the voice of La Viuda.

"I wrote ..." I said. "...I wrote that I think it's stupid being Mexican! I wrote that I wish I wasn't Mexican!"

All their musics quieted at once. Nobody knew what to feel. But then the Save-Our-Cities lady turned all sweet and said, "José , you should be *proud* of being Mexican. You should celebrate your heritage, and everything connected with being Mexican. You come from such a rich culture, and let me tell you that there's nothing special about being white. Most of the white people in this country have forgotten who they are and where they come from. They're not anywhere near as close to who they really are as your people are. I don't know why *anyone* would *want* to be white when they have the rich, beautiful culture that *you* have."

She smiled real nice, every bit of her hoping that she had made an impression on Mr. Pietr. I called the song, "See Me! See Me!"

"Stupid bitch!" I yelled. "I don't want to be white! I want to be *black*!" Like Tyque. Like Zane. Even like Mr. Curtis the Mayor's man, like everybody who I felt made sense, and not like people like Mama or Mr. Pietr or the Save-Our-Cities lady. "I wish I was born black!"

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I jumped up from the table. I spilled the Pepsi when I did. I ran away, out of the house, then down toward 80th and 73rd where Zane and Tyque's houses were.

I didn't care what they were really all meeting at the house for. I didn't care. I just wanted to get away.

It took me a long time to find them. Zane's Mom said that he was over at Tyque's house, and Tyque's Mom said he was over at Zane's. I started running south — it seemed right, it felt right. South and more south, trying to feel the air for tunes that played like Tyque's or Zane's. Crazy, I thought. Crazy that I was depending more and more on the tunes and the notes and the melodies and the songs, just like *him*, just like what I didn't want to be, didn't want to become, didn't want...

Down near 101st, I found them running and hiding from tree to tree. I felt the air for songs and could tell that there was nothing scary nearby, but that didn't seem to matter to them. Most of the thrill was in pretending there was something scary everywhere, all the time.

"We bad!" I hollered. "We bad, we beat, but we ain't blood!"

They turned, and Zane smiled at me, all big and crazy. Tyque smiled, too, and just as big, but, when you consider Tyque, it didn't seem as crazy.

"Hey!" yelled Zane. "How you doing? Come here, you jerk!"

My heart felt light all at once. Tyque and Zane. I ran to them.

"About time you got here," Zane said, punching my shoulder. "We been wondering where you been. Where you been, Joey?"

"Around, man," Tyque said. "He been around. Why you pushing him? He's here now. You're here now, Joey, ain't you?" He laughed, and he punched me, too.

Zane Gerard is my best friend and so is Tyque Raymond. I think being from Mexico is stupid.

"Well, then, let's go!" Zane yelled. "Joey gonna wanna see this!"

"See what?" I asked.

"Yeah!" Tyque said. "Let's go!"

So we went. Really, *they* went and I followed, because they weren't going to tell me anything until we got there. That was how they were, Tyque and Zane. That was how they *really* were.

So we went south. More south than we'd ever gone before, deep into the

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Watts area, down into the parts where you weren't supposed to go, where we were always warned *not* to go. Down to 107th Street East, a little north of the old railroad tracks that hadn't been used for years. The tracks sat there like a failed try at doing something worthwhile this far south.

"Just look at those," Tyque said. I looked. They caused me to stop breathing for a second: three towers jutting out from the middle of the dead neighborhood, reaching almost a hundred feet up. We got closer, and I could see the garbage they were built out of: broken pottery decorated the walls and rungs, the bottoms of 7-Up bottles formed the archways that led into the areas around the towers' bases, with Milk Of Magnesia bottles next to the 7-Up green with their crystal blue, and seashells, corn-cob imprints, tiles of all sorts, teapot spouts, toys in the shapes of unicorns, horses, dolls, all of them blending together to form three garbage towers reaching high, high up.

"Wow," I said. "How'd you find these?"

"We been following Mr. Pietr every night," Tyque said. "This is where he always goes!"

"He stands here and plays almost all night, I think." Zane was rocking on the heels of his sneakers. He twitched a little, smiling big. "It's crazy. It's like he's in love with these towers."

"Are they his?" I asked.

"Nah, they been here for years. Think the History Song, it tells everything about them."

I scowled. "Just tell me."

Zane ran up to the arched gateway in the wall around the towers. Me and Tyque followed. "Look close," Zane said as we stood there. "You might have to squint to see them."

I didn't need to squint. The towers had their own music; I just had to think clear about the tune, and then I was able to see them. There were about fifty or so people in there...ghost people, shadow people, and they would have been harder to see if I didn't let myself hear the tower music.

"See 'em?" asked Tyque.

"Yeah," I said.

"Yeah," said Zane.

They wandered around in there, inside the gates. A lot of them were poking at the bases of the three towers. It was like they were searching for soft spots, and like they were looking around for anything, rocks, stones, old

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Pepsi bottles, to make the garbage towers even bigger and stronger than they already were. They looked lost, although not afraid.

"See how many Crips there be in there?" Zane asked. It was true. I could see nine members of the Crips Gang, still dressed in colors, wandering around but almost invisible like everyone else. Crips were a scary gang. I felt myself shiver even seeing them here, locked up safe. If I could only count nine, there were probably more Crips in there that I wasn't seeing.

"Crazy old Italian guy built these things," Tyque whispered. "Long time ago. He just started picking up garbage, cementing it all together, and stacking it up bit by bit."

"And now Mr. Pietr is filling it up with people," Zane said. He peered through the barred gates. "It's like they're in the zoo."

"Yeah," I said. "And the music holding them there, ain't it terrible? It hurts my head."

Zane looked at me funny. "Music? You hear music, Joey?"

"I don't hear nothing," Tyque said.

And all at once, I understood what the big dinner at my house was really for.

I ran, north, and ran and ran towards home.

I ran in through our front door. They were all there: Mr. Curtis the Mayor's man, sitting on our couch next to Father Galloway, wiping his forehead and looking dazed; the Save-Our-Cities lady, with her eyes wide and a hand over her mouth; Mr Pietr, the pipe in his hands.

And Mama, who was holding my brother Luis in her arms. Both of them were crying. "I'm home, Mama," Luis said between his sobs. "I'm so sorry. But I'm home, Mama."

All of Luis's friends were there, too. They weren't doing anything. They stood in a straight line, shoulder to shoulder, unmoving, eyes empty. Behind them were the walls of shelves holding Mama's own unmoving, empty-eyed collection of dolls.

Mama released Luis and faced the Mayor's man. "I told you he could. I told you so."

"I never..." Mr. Curtis stammered. "I didn't even imagine he could ..."

No one bothered to notice me.

"As for the rest of you," Mr. Pietr said to Luis's friends, "I want you to

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go back to your families as well. Love your families. Be there for them."

He started playing the pipe, and I shut out his tune by humming "I Ain't Nobody, I Ain't Nowhere, I Ain't Nothing, So There."

Luis's friends, one by one, walked past me, out the door. The Save-Our-Cities lady walked to Mr. Pietr and touched his arm. "With this ..." she said. "With this...the wonderful good you can do!" Her music, the tunes behind her, were a confused jumble of her Save-The-World and I-Want-You-Mister-Pietr songs.

The Mayor's man stood, too. He was still shaking and wiping his head. "What do you want? In exchange for your help?"

Mr. Pietr shrugged, but he was smiling. "What do you offer?"

Mr. Curtis stared at my brother Luis. "Anything," he whispered. "We'll pay anything!"

Mr. Pietr's smile got bigger. Then Mama saw me. Her arms were still around Luis. "*Mira* —" she said, "Look. Your brother is home."

I looked at him. "Luis," I said.

"Hello, José," said Luis.

José.

"No, Mama," I said. I glanced at Mr. Pietr. "He ain't home."

THE WORLD of our neighborhood started becoming so *nice* after that. Nobody saw any more Crips in the streets, and other gangs around the Fifteenth District grew smaller and smaller. The exceptions were the gangs that figured out something funny was happening. They either stayed low, broke up, or started working on community stuff like cleaning up the projects or helping the new youth groups that started appearing at schools and churches. A lot of people just disappeared. I heard the adults call them the "Ones Who Left Town."

Mr. Pietr and his pipe walked the streets every night, and taught our class every day. As far as I could tell, he never slept.

Luis was a model son. I couldn't remember my father too good, but Luis reminded me of my father. He took Mama to Mass every morning, worked a cashier job during the day, and helped around the house at night. Every Monday evening, he and Mama dusted La Viuda's doll collection. Sometimes, some of Luis's nighttime friends stopped by to help out with the dusting.

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School ended, most everybody in my class got A's or A-minuses. I got mostly C's, two D's. And a B-plus in reading, a B-plus. Summer gave Mr. Pietr more time to walk the streets and play his songs. When he wasn't out doing that, he spent time with the Save-Our-Cities lady. They were engaged now, planning to get married in August.

I walked the streets after midnight. I think I was the only one left who could, except for Mr. Pietr himself. I avoided him, although sometimes we would see each other from far away, at opposite ends of deserted streets. He'd stop playing and call out, "José ! Come here, José !" I would run away.

He caught up with me just once. I was at the Watts Towers, staring in at the shadows of the "Ones Who Left Town." There were hundreds of them now, maybe a thousand piled in there, twisting around on top of each other like they were still trying to move around, to find something to do.

"They're not dead, you know."

I jumped because of the voice. Which was stupid. It could only be one person.

"They might as well be," I said.

Mr. Pietr nodded carefully, watching them. He didn't move toward me or even try to look at me, but I kept an eye on his pipe. He held it loosely, but I couldn't be sure he wouldn't try to play something at me when I wasn't ready to catch him at it.

"These towers," he said, "do you know why they're so beautiful? Do you know what they mean, José ?"

I didn't say anything.

"They're garbage. Beautiful, beautiful garbage. And they mean something. Something about what you can do with people, even the ones you think are garbage."

He stared at them, the Ones Who Left Town, so deeply that I had to look myself. But I couldn't see it. I could see how beautiful the towers were, but I couldn't see what was so beautiful about a pile of addicts and pushers and hookers and pimps all caught up by music that made them a stack of shadows and prisoners to the piper. I didn't feel sorry for them; I just couldn't see what made them beautiful.

Luis could have been in there. If things had been different, it could have turned out a lot worse for him, I supposed. He could be buried there, somewhere I couldn't even see him, under a bunch of other people-shadows

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that stretched upwards on the insides of the towers. But was it any different now? *He might as well be. He might as well be in there.*

I tensed when the pipe music started, and I almost ran away. But the first few notes told me that the song wasn't aimed at me, and that it couldn't hurt me. It was *about* me, though, a song that had my name in the title. I looked at him, the piper all pied again, eyes burning and colors everywhere, but this time it was less violent, a lot quieter. It was a hard tune, one that I couldn't understand all the way, and one I knew I couldn't remember for myself after just hearing it once. It was a song that needed a lot of practice.

The colors got tighter around Mr. Pietr. They crushed on him and mashed him up, and for a while he was all blurry. The light became all white, then, and when it went away, when the music stopped, I was looking at somebody else. It was a small black boy. A boy my size, my height, shaped like me, and very, very definitely with my eyes. It was me I was looking at, except it was me as a black boy.

"You can be anything you want to be, José," the little black me said. "And that's rare. Not everybody can hope for that. Most people ..." — he gestured toward the towers and the Ones Who Left Town — "... most people can't be what they want. They follow the paths and roads laid out for them from when they were born. From even before they were born. But every once in a while there is one born out of thousands who can become what he wants. And every generation, out of the ones born who *can* be what they want, there is one who is even more. The one who can understand the music. Not just hear it, but understand it. And that's you, Joey. It was me, too, but now it's you."

The night was cold. Or maybe I was shivering because I was listening to myself, myself the black boy, telling me about who and what I was. Telling me I could become anything I decided, except that I also had to be him because I could understand the music.

"This will be your pipe, soon," he said.

"I don't want it."

He laughed short, a grunt really. He looked at the towers again. "It doesn't matter. You know the power isn't in the pipe. It's in the music. But you'll want the pipe, anyway. It's like a symbol of the office. We've used it for centuries, every one of us since the maniac of Hamelin used it. It might go back even further. I don't know."

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"I don't want the fucking pipe! I don't want the music, either! Why don't you take the goddamn thing and keep using it yourself? Just leave me alone!"

He looked at me then, burning and angry. It was like me, staring at my own dreams of myself, and myself staring back with a hate that I didn't expect. He lifted the pipe and threw it, hurled it away from himself and from me and from the tower. It looped through the air, but turned in a curve and looped right back toward him, landing smack against his chest, where he caught it. "Keep it?" he screamed. "*Keep* it? You think I have any choice but to *keep* it? You stand there hating me, José Hernez, without even knowing who I am! Without even knowing what I've been through! Do you think it's easy trying to save the world? Trying to save the mindless masses from themselves, only to discover that you've completely lost yourself in the process? It's not my fault you are who you are. Just as it's not my fault that I'm who *I* am! *We are pipers*, José! And now it's your turn to carry the music. Ask me. Just *please* ask me, and the pipe will be yours."

He held it out toward me. He was crying, fucking crying. "I can do anything with this pipe, José. Anything, except force you to take it away from me."

I tried to glare at him. I imagined Zane's best glare, and I tried to imitate it. He held the pipe closer. "You see," he said, quieter, "I can stop doing this now, if you help. There are two criteria for handing over the pipe. Do you know what the word 'criteria' means?"

"It means 'rules,'" I said, without having to think the Vocabulary Song to find out.

"Yes, rules. Two rules. The first is that I be willing to surrender the pipe to another piper who can understand the music. The second is that I stop trying to save *everybody* and focus on one person. One person that I love. And I've found that, José. I love someone, now, even more than I love loving *everyone*."

He started switching back now, done with being me and starting to be Mr. Pietr again. The colors swirled around him, and he grew taller, paler.

"The Save-Our-Cities lady, you mean?"

He grimaced, looking confused at first, but then he smiled. "Susan. Yes, the Save-Our-Cities lady, Susan. I love her, José, and all that remains is for you to let me retire from all this and give you the pipe."

Now I felt haunted. Even seeing him standing there as Mr. Pietr, tall and

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too thin and too white, I kept thinking of him as short and black and me. Anything I wanted to be, that's what he was saying.

"But the power isn't in the pipe," I said. "It's in the music."

"Yes," he said, sadder than anything I'd ever heard him say. "Yes. But the office is in the pipe. The responsibility is in the pipe. And there's more power there, too. More in the pipe than the music alone could ever have."

Me, I thought. He was me, but looking like Tyque and Zane, and looking good that way, looking right. "Anything?" I asked. "You can do anything with the pipe?"

"Yes," he said. "Almost anything."

"Then keep it," I said. And I ran. I ran into the night of Watts, away from him, from his towers, and away from anything and everything.

I stole fifty cents from La Viuda's big wicker purse the next afternoon. As I took it, I heard the voice of Mr. Curtis the Mayor's man, and I heard Mama saying he could have back the two quarters that were the government's investment in her for the day. *I'm not stealing from her,* I decided. *I'm borrowing from Mr. Curtis.*

I went to the little store on the corner of East 83rd Street and Compton and bought a cheap kazoo. There was six cents in change, which I decided I should put back in La Viuda's purse later. I ran from the store to Martin Luther King Jr. Hospital, nearly four miles. That was where Tyque, Zane, and a whole bunch of other kids from my class were working around the outside fences, clearing out papers and weeds and broken glass as part of the Saint Malachy's Summer Youth Group's project-of-the-week.

"Hey, Zane!" I said, "Yuh, Zane!" He looked up at me and grinned. He'd been lifting the chain-link part of the fence, the loose part in between the metal posts, and Tyque was on the other side, picking up broken soda and beer bottles and putting them in a trash bucket.

"Yuh, José!" Zane said. "You come to help? This is a real pain in the butt, and we can use the help!"

"In a minute!" I said. "But listen to this — I just made up a new song of my own. Wanna hear?"

"Sure," said Zane. "Go ahead, sure!" Tyque leaned up on the fence to listen, too.

I took out the kazoo and hummed through it one of the new songs I'd been

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thinking up. It was called, "I Am Me, and Ain't No Music Make Me Nothing Else." It wasn't a very good song, since it was something I'd made up real fast. Could have been better, I knew. But then *any* song could be better.

When I started humming through the kazoo, both Tyque and Zane got real still, and their faces scrunched up like they were trying to decide something inside their heads.

I hummed and kazooed my breath out, looking them both in the eyes as much as I could. Zane broke first.

"What the fuck, man?" he said. He dropped the part of the chain-link fence he'd been holding up. "What the fuck?"

Tyque followed soon after that. "Hey, Joey," he said, "what the hell's happening to us?"

"Nothing, man," I said. "It just *stopped* happening."

They looked shook up, and were looking around like they were trying to figure out where they were.

"Keep thinking that song," I said. "Keep humming it to yourselves."

I had two and a half hours to wait until they were together. They'd all be there again, La Viuda had said: Mr. Pietr, Father Galloway, the Save-Our-Cities lady, Mr. Curtis, there at our house for another meeting. I made Mama tell me by playing "Say Me Everything" on the kazoo, and then I played "Forget I Played Music" to her.

I spent the next two hours outside the gates of Saint Malachy's, watching some of the older black guys play basketball. To them, I knew, most music was nothing. I only heard one song behind them: "Gotta Beat, Gotta Beat, We Bad." There was nothing wrong with that song. It was a *good* song, in fact, one that they'd picked for themselves, and although it was clouded with other minor harmonies — "Gonna Be Michael Jordan" or "Gotta Find Some Money" or "Should Be With the Woman" — they were *real* tunes, tunes they'd picked for themselves and that weren't forced on them. I spent the whole two hours listening to the real songs that came from out of them, songs that didn't come forced from Mr. Pietr's night music.

Then I went home, with half an hour until the meeting. It was Monday night, and Luis was sitting in the front room, carefully dusting the dozens of dolls.

"Yuh Luis," I said.

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"Hey, José!" He was working on one of Mama's porcelain girl dolls in the fluffy white dress with lace all around the bottom edges. Even when he looked right at me talking, Luis's dust rag traced slow circles around the doll's eyes.

"Luis, do you like me?"

"Of course I like you, José. I love my family."

He kept dusting.

"I like you, too. I really do." I took out the kazoo.

Luis smiled. "What's that? Where'd you get that, José?"

But before I could play, the doorbell rang. Mama brought them into the living room, and Mr. Curtis was already yammering, all excited. "No murders! Not one in an entire week! Los Angeles had been averaging four murders a *day*, a lot of them from this area — "

"I read the news article this morning." Father Galloway looked relaxed. I think it was the first time I'd ever seen him when he wasn't nervous. "Perhaps it's time to make some sort of statement. If the local press is starting to notice the drop in crime, it won't be long before the national media — "

"Who would believe us? Do *we* even believe it?"

Then in walked Mr. Pietr. Save-Our-Cities-Susan was with him, holding his arm and pressed up all close to his side. "No press," Mr. Pietr said. "That wasn't part of the bargain." Then he looked at me. "Hello, José."

It was funny how he was the only one who even noticed me anymore. Even Mama hadn't said hello to me.

"Yuh," I said.

Mr. Curtis couldn't stop gushing. He took hold of Mr. Pietr's other arm, the one Susan wasn't hanging on. "Imagine, though! If we got national coverage, and we could broadcast your music coast to coast!"

Mr. Pietr frowned deep. I could feel my own face doing the same thing, the exact same expression.

All these people now, crowded in our front room. Mama started going around with coffee, and they were all trying to talk at once. The noise started hurting my head, and all their music playing behind them grew louder and louder. I got angry. Who did they think they were? What gave them the right to take away other people's lives? Other people's minds and hearts?

Hidden in my palm, the kazoo was getting sweaty. I squeezed it hard.

"There's an issue," Mr. Pietr said. "Before you make any other plans, there's an issue that needs to be resolved. Payment."

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Everybody got quiet.

"I expect to be paid in full before you receive any more services."

"Well, of course," Mr. Curtis said. "I'll have to talk to the council. In fact, if you could demonstrate for them the way you did for us, I know we can convince them to cut a check the same day." He shuffled a bit, staring at the floor. "Of course, we didn't discuss amounts..."

"I don't want money. I want property."

Mr. Curtis eased a bit. "Property? That would be fine, too — "

"The Watts Towers. I want them legally transferred to my name and Susan's."

Even Susan looked thrown by that one. She loosened up her arm-clenching a bit. "Honey, I don't think — "

"We made a deal. An agreement, Mr. Curtis. As I recall, you offered me *anything*. Not a very responsible offer, I'll admit. But what I'm asking is modest considering what you've received."

Mr. Curtis was shaking his head. "But they're a national monument. *National*. They're not ours to give! Look, we can give you money and land, we can be extremely generous to you, but we can't give you what's not ours."

"Honey," Susan said, "what do we want with — "

Mr. Pietr pulled his arm from hers, real gentle. "It's what I've chosen. They're what I want, and you'll give them to me. It was agreed."

Mr. Curtis crossed his arms, but I knew he was scared. "Please. Please don't push this way. We have no written contract that says you'd be given the Watts Towers."

"Contract?" Mr. Pietr reached under his coat and pulled out the pipe. "We didn't seem to need a contract when we started all this."

Beside me, Luis grabbed my shoulder. I looked at his eyes; he was looking at the pipe. Barely, just real, real quiet, I could hear a song coming from him. It was a struggling song. It was the real Luis, trying to find his way up again. Buried far, far under. But the longer he stared at the pipe, the weaker it got, until I couldn't hear it any longer.

"I don't care about a lot of things," I whispered to Luis. "I guess I don't care about anybody too much. But I care about you, Luis. It's like that I love you, you know?"

Luis looked at me funny. "I know that. I know that, José."

"I really do. Please call me Joey. Just one time, call me Joey."

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"Sure. Why?"

"Just do it."

"Okay. Okay, *Joey.*"

I smiled at him. Then I lifted the kazoo to my lips. The song I played was "Come Home, Luis." As I played, his face got confused and he stopped making the dusty circles on the porcelain doll's face. "Joey?" he said.

Everybody stared at us. Then Mama shouted, *"No, hijo, no!"*

Mr. Pietr started playing, the song he'd first used on Luis, called "Be A Good Boy."

I switched my tune to "Pietr Can't Breathe." The pipe tune stopped, and Mr. Pietr's eyes popped wide. When he finally managed a breath, he gasped, "Very good, José."

"My name is Joey, mother fucker!" I hit him with "Pietr Can't Stand." He fell to the floor, but kept the pipe to his lips. He played, "Burn, Joey, Burn," and I felt like I was frying from the insides out. I screamed.

And he stood. He glowed, just like that first night, his eyes all on fire, and a blowing scarf appearing out of nowhere, his hair being whipped by a wind I couldn't feel. I tried to stop him, but the pain, the burning, I could hardly move. I couldn't even hum.

Mr. Pietr began playing the first few notes of "Luis Hernez Is Mine Forever."

"You're hurting him!" Luis yelled. And that quick, he was almost flying across the room, jumping right into Mr. Pietr and knocking him back against the wall. No one else moved; Luis still held the china doll and pounded and pounded it against Mr. Pietr's head until Pietr lost his colors and burning and glowing.

My burning stopped, too.

Mr. Pietr was almost unconscious, but it didn't look like Luis was gonna stop pounding. The Save-Our-Cities lady jumped on Luis's back, not saying anything or screaming the way I had — just clawing at Luis's face, trying to make him stop.

Luis hit her. It was so fast that I didn't have time to stop him. He swung the china doll around and smashed it into the side of her head. The doll's face shattered, but he kept swinging, cutting her up, cutting her bad, jamming the jagged edges into her face and neck. She still didn't scream. She just fell back onto the floor looking surprised, bloody and surprised. Her neck was bad,

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blood coming really fast. Her eyes stayed open. I listened for it, but her music was gone.

Mr. Curtis, Father Galloway, and Mama finally moved. I realized they'd been frozen. That's why they didn't do anything; Mr. Pietr had froze them up solid so that he could fight my music. But now they could move, and Luis bolted up toward the front door. He stopped for just a second, just to look back at me. I think he wanted me to come. He wanted me to run with him.

I couldn't. There was blood everywhere, blood all over him, all over the floor, all over the shattered china doll lying next to the Save-Our-Cities lady.

"Run, Luis," I said, but too quiet for anybody but me to hear.

Mr. Curtis tended to Mr. Pietr, who was starting to move again. Father Galloway leaned over the Save-Our-Cities lady's body, whispering what I figured were prayers for the sacrament. And Mama sat quietly on the sofa, hands folded, head down. All the La Viuda mask was gone. She was just an old, beaten woman now.

I stepped past them, all of them. I stepped into the doorway and watched Luis running down East 83rd, west toward Florence. He got farther and farther away.

Inside, Mr. Pietr was crouching over Susan, holding her in his arms. "I loved her," he said. I realized he was looking right at me. His voice sounded like an echo, far away. "She was the only one I cared about. I loved her. You took her away from me. You took away the only thing I loved."

Down the road, Luis sprinted around a corner, down a side street, out of sight.

Father Galloway sat beside Mama and took her hand. "Viuda, we need to call the police." Mama said nothing. She didn't even look at him.

Then I heard a tune growing, playing in the background behind Mr. Pietr. It was scratchy, strange, a deranged bunch of notes. "My towers," he said. "I'll bury her at my towers. You'll take care of the paperwork, right? I have to bury her at my towers."

He lifted his pipe and started playing; I raised the kazoo, but waited. As his tune started, the air around him and Susan's body turned smoky. It was like a hole or something opened up right behind them, and I could see the base of one of the towers right there in our living room. And at the base I saw some of the shadow people, the Ones Who Left Town, starting to grow more solid, so that I couldn't see through them any longer. A couple of them had shovels

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and big steel picks, and were already breaking at the pavement to dig a grave.

Mr. Pietr picked up Susan. "You can send the deed to my new address," he said, and then he, Susan, the hole, and the smoke were gone.

"Sweet Jesus," said Father Galloway. "My sweet Jesus."

FIFTEEN MINUTES later, it hit. Mr. Curtis and Father Galloway were still arguing about what to tell the police when they called, and Mama still hadn't moved one bit. I stood over by the wall of dolls, actually thinking that I should maybe dust the ones that Luis hadn't gotten to. That was all I was thinking. I could have been thinking a lot of things, but I made myself not think them.

Then we were all knocked down. It was like a solid wall of sound tore right through the house, coming up from the south and keeping on going. South, where the Watts Towers were.

I stood up, but it was like standing in hot, muddy water. Nothing had fallen down except the people; Mama was lying on her side, still on the sofa.

And then the yank. I felt the music, stronger than any music ever, pulling me toward the south. My feet started moving, but I grabbed one of the doll shelves. Everybody else started walking toward the door, even Mama. I tried to yell to them, but I couldn't even hear my own voice. As they filed out, my sisters came from their rooms in the back. They left, too.

I made myself hum a wall of silence around me, but it was weak and I still could hardly move. I let myself walk to the door and threw up my arms to catch myself on the portal. Everybody was in the street...*everybody*. Doors were open up and down East 83rd, and the whole neighborhood, old, young, babies in their mother's arms, were walking across the street, through yards, all facing the direction of the Watts Towers. My Uncle Jesús and his boy Paquito were even carrying my grandmother between them.

I couldn't make music for them to hear. I couldn't stop them. I couldn't do anything.

So I went north. Each step was like dragging myself through a hurricane that tried to pull me back toward the towers. Sometimes I even had to push my way through crowds of people walking against me. I crossed Florence, forced myself to Gage, rested for a bit at Sleuson, and then finally, when I reached the north side of Vernon, fell to the ground. I was out of it.

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A Korean man stepped out of the small grocery store I'd fallen down in front of. "Are you hurt, boy?" he said. "Boy, are you hurt?"

I was breathing so hard that all I could say was, "Don't!" When he stepped over the curb I'd fallen on, his eyes went all empty. He stopped looking at me and started walking south.

I felt a nudging on my foot. The edge of the wall was moving forward. It was slow, just a creeping up that you could hardly notice, but it was growing.

I crawled a little farther away from it, and when I'd gotten my strength back, went three miles farther north.

The first tower went up a week later. It was *Las Muñecas*, the one made out of dolls.

It took the National Guard about three units to figure out that anybody who went in wasn't going to come out.

The Army didn't quite believe that. I think it took them about five units.

And six helicopters that flew too low.

And for seven years now, they've staked a perimeter around it, backing up a few feet every day as it continues to grow. They argue about estimates for how long it will take to reach downtown Los Angeles, and they argue about how many people are actually in there building those crazy towers. Other weird things happen, too. Every once in a while, whole busloads of people drive into town from Chicago, or Houston, even one from New York. And they smash through the barricades and drive right into the area. Some of the buses get stopped by the police or the Army, but the people in there can't be stopped unless they're actually pinned to the ground by six or seven cops. Some of them stand up and keep walking anyway, dragging a few cops right inside. I read an article in the paper last week that said the police union was going to refuse to stop anybody else.

Me, I live in Highland Park now, way northeast of LA. I work in the library there, helping re-stack books. I'd like to become a librarian some day because I like to read. It used to be that I couldn't read very well. Now I can. I taught myself. I didn't use any music to help.

I still hear him sometimes. And not just at night, either. He keeps calling, "José, come build our city. Come save our city, José." Or sometimes he has a different message, like two years ago when his voice said, "Your

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Mama passed away this evening, José. Come to her funeral. We're burying her beside Susan." Or last year when he taunted, "Luis says he wants your help, José. He says, 'Tell Joey to come here.'"

And one day I just might. But not to build their city of towers. Instead, to go back and get Luis out of there. And then to find Tyque. Then Zane, then my sisters, all one at a time. I haven't done it yet because the songs I have aren't strong enough. There's no way I could beat through the wall and save anyone but myself. But when my music is strong enough, I will. I'll get them out, one by one. I'll save individuals.

Because that's how it needs to be done. *Eso es. Sí, que es.*

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

THE OLD JOKE goes that April showers bring May flowers. And what do *Mayflowers* bring? Another issue of *F&SF*. All right, so the humor doesn't translate real well. But May's stories are as startling as colonizing a new world.

Fiction by **Edward Bryant** is all too rare these days, so we are very lucky to have a new short story from him. "Flirting with Death" is about Linda who, unable to sleep one night, decides to go out on the town. There she discovers a seamy and haunting side to the city where she has lived most of her life. She also catches the eye of a most interesting man....

Ian MacLeod, who inspired our stunning February cover, inspires another. "The Noonday Pool" is about a well-known composer who stops his car late one night near a deserted patch of woodland. There he meets a charming, and unusual, young woman named Peg with nowhere to sleep. He brings her home, and she changes not just his household, but his life.

In an issue full of chance meetings and surprises, hot new writer **L. Timmel Duchamp** manages to surprise and shock. In "De Secretis Mulierum," a group of scientists use a new device to peer into the past — and they discover secrets the world does not want to know. Secrets that will not only change the history of art, but the history of religion. Secrets that change the way people view themselves and their assumptions. "De Secretis Mulierum" is bound to be one of the most discussed stories of 1995.

As summer approaches, we will return to what may become a tradition — our sports issue. Last year, *F&SF* provided baseball when the major leagues did not. This year, we will continue that tradition, with stories by **Dale Bailey**, **Rick Wilbur**, and others. Future issues will also have stories by **Nina Kiriki Hoffman**, **Ron Goulart**, and **Richard Bowes**. We also have some lovely covers in store — **Barclay Shaw's** rendition of an **R. Garcia y Robertson** story, **Ron Walotsky's** vision of a **Ray Aldridge** novelet, and Hugo-winner **Bob Eggleton's** view of a new fantasy world by **Marc Laidlaw**. If you haven't subscribed yet, it's time to do so. Otherwise you'll miss some of the best fiction money can buy.

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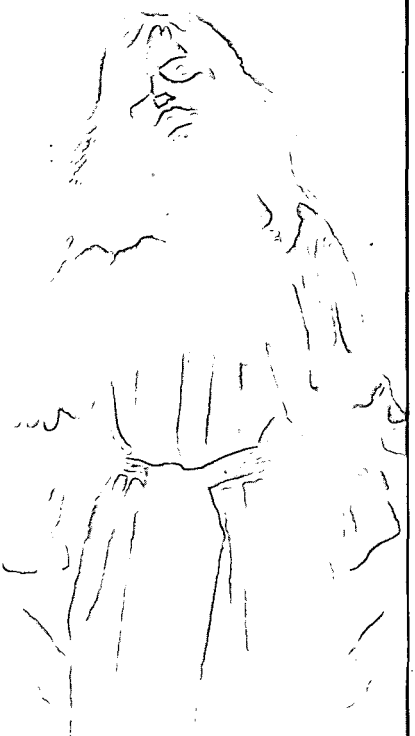

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